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TENALI RAMAN

Kavitha Mandana started her writing career as an advertising copywriter. She began writing and illustrating for children after her daughter was born ten years ago. She has written extensively for the *Deccan Herald*'s children's supplement *Open Sesame* and the children's magazine *Chatterbox*. Her other loves are gardening, doodling and dog-sitting an adopted stray.

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TENALI RAMAN

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Eight Elephants Seated in Court

HAMPI, 7 SEPTEMBER 2005: I swear this is true! It happened at the court of King Krishnadevaraya, the sixteenth-century ruler of the Vijayanagar kingdom, in part of present-day Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. And it didn't happen on one odd day when the king was in a crazy mood, but it occurred *throughout* his entire reign.

I'm sure I've got you all worried now, thinking, Where was the *space*? and Didn't the court *stink*?. But relax. The eight elephants were the kingdom's eight star poets on whom the king had conferred the title of Astadiggaja.

Today if you call somebody an elephant, you would be considered very rude. But Vijayanagar's eight star

poets were quite happy with the honour. After all, it meant that they were regarded as giants in the world of literature, and the honour was the equivalent of our present-day Bharat Ratna or Padmashree. The idea of Astadiggaja goes back even further though, into Hindu mythology. Eight elephants were believed to hold up the earth at the eight points of the compass. Nowadays most full-time poets starve to death. Or they have jobs in the daytime that earn them salaries, while they write poetry at night in the hope somebody will read them. But during the rule of Krishnadevaraya of the Tuluva dynasty, Telugu poetry was very popular.

The king himself was a famous poet and was constantly showering his favourite composers with gold coins and pearl necklaces. One of his poems, *Amuktamalyada*, is even today rated among the five all-time greatest Telugu poems. Naturally, with so much money to be made, the poets of the land flocked to the capital city on the banks of the Tungabhadra River. And one of these eight 'elephants' was none other than Tenali Raman!

Now, in case you're wondering why on earth, *I*, Sulekha Nair, of Class 5C of Carmel Convent, Bangalore, the world's Number 1 Hater of History, is up to her nose in all this, here's the horrible truth. I'm stuck, and it's all my own fault. Mama, who is a

photographer with the *Monuments* magazine, had to come away to Hampi for a whole month. I could have stayed back and gone to school, with Papa packing me my lunches (to be honest, his are quite terrible). But the week before Mama was to leave, I foolishly asked her if I could tag along. She thought it was a good idea and so did my principal. *That* should have made me suspect something was seriously wrong. Sure enough, halfway to Hampi, Mama casually told me that the principal had agreed to let me off on the condition that I wrote a full-length report on 'My Month at Hampi'! In no less than 5,000 words! If I'd known *that* earlier, I'd have chosen to stay back with Papa's terrible lunches and Hindi tuition!

So here I am in Hampi, which is presently crawling with historians, archaeologists, photographers and a whole bunch of other experts . . . mostly from Mama's magazine. I have been trying to work on my report now and then, peskily asking the experts questions that they act too busy to answer. The only person who seems to have the time for me is my new friend TJ. His father owns a string of tea stalls all over Hampi, catering to all the tourists. TJ boasts he is a *direct descendant* of Tenali Raman! (TJ stands for Tenali Junior.) Mama laughed very rudely when I told her that. But I believe him. He tells me the most interesting stories about his

great, great, great, great . . . (I forget how many generations apart the two Tenalis are) grandfather. I've been writing those stories down too . . . After all, even *that* is history, isn't it? I only hope my principal thinks so too. She told Mama that if my project looked too 'half-baked', she'd mark me absent for the whole month! Anyway, let's get back to history.

I was so used to thinking of Tenali Raman as a clever clown that I was stunned to discover (from a historian at *Monuments*) that he was also a serious poet. As I said, during Krishnadevaraya's rule, poetry was hugely popular. People those days waited for the latest compositions from their poets, much like how we now wait for the latest Hindi movie music to be released so we can sing the songs and watch their videos. The moment one of the Astadiggaja composed a prabhanda or an original poem, musicians would set it to music and everybody would be singing it. Directors and producers would turn it into a drama, and people would flock to watch it—fighting for the first day's first show! Tenali's most famous work, *Panduranga Mahatmya*, was a box-office hit and not only in those days! Even now, 500 years later, it is still ranked along with his king's poem as one of the five great kavyas of Telugu literature.

Krishnadevaraya died in 1529, after ruling for twenty

years. From all my interviewing of the experts, I've learnt that his famous jester outlived not only him, but also his half-brother and successor, Achyutaraya. Tenali Raman lived on till the reign of Achyutaraya's son, Venkata. I wondered then, why are all the stories only about Tenali and Krishnadevaraya? It would have been nice to also have some Achyuta–Tenali stories or Venkata–Tenali stories. I figured that the later kings must have found Tenali a bit too clever for comfort! I can understand that. If I'd ruled over Vijayanagar, I'd have sent Tenali Raman off to some dangerous border town, on some impossible, life-threatening mission. Anything to keep him out of my court. That way nobody would compare his IQ with mine!

I think Tenali Raman, like Birbal from Akbar's court, was lucky. Both these jesters were in the courts of brilliant kings. The rulers were so smart themselves that they enjoyed being teased by their witty courtiers. In Krishnadevaraya's case, poets were the king's heroes. When poet laureate Peddana composed the *Manucharita* and dedicated it to the king, Krishnadevaraya showed his appreciation by being a pole-bearer of the poet's palanquin!

The other kings were perhaps not too comfortable being criticized. So their courts were filled with hangers-on whose only job was to *praise* the king. Mama told

me that in Kannada folk stories, like the court jester, there is a character called the Hoggaluva Patta, which means the praising Brahmin. So while the jester's job was to jokingly expose the faults of ministers and kings, the Hoggaluva Patta's job was exactly the opposite. He was paid to praise inefficient kings and make them feel like gods. Maybe after the talented and brilliant King Krishnadevaraya died, his not-so-brilliant heirs preferred to have a professional 'praiser' in court, rather than an honest critic like Tenali Raman.

Four Priceless Chinese Vases, Smashed

9 SEPTEMBER 2005: My friend TJ and I did not become the best of pals immediately. The first time I saw him, he seemed to me just like those boys who love to show off, the type I avoid in school. He was serving tea to the entire photography crew from Mama's magazine. And instead of doing it gently, one at a time, he decided to impress everybody by carrying three trays, piled one on top of the other, full of tea cups brimming with steaming-hot tea. It was disgusting the way Mama and her friends kept oohhing and aaahhing as they watched him walk towards them, stepping over rocks and ancient debris. I personally feel the best way to deal with show-offs is to ignore them. So I refused to smile or say 'Shabash!' the way everybody else did. And

even refused to *have* tea, though I'd have liked a cup.

A long-haired archaeologist sitting close to us was showing around some shards of glazed pottery. They were blue in colour and he explained that they were very obviously Chinese in origin. At which point, this boy, Rajan, as everybody called him, just laid down his tray on the rocks and sat down near me. I gave him a withering glare, but he didn't seem to notice and was more interested in the broken pieces of Chinese pots. Quite forgetting the other cups of tea waiting on his tray to be delivered, he asked the old man if he could look more closely at the shards. 'I promise I'll be careful,' he said when the archaeologist hesitated.

After examining and then returning the shards to the old man, the boy turned to me and said, as if he was discussing the morning's news, 'Those must be the pieces from the Chinese vases that Tenali Raman got broken.' I forgot I was supposed to be ignoring him. 'Tenali Raman?' I said, wondering what was the connection. He quickly reached across to his tray and held it out to me, 'Have a cup of tea, quickly, before it gets cold . . . I'll serve the rest and be back to tell you about Tenali Raman and the Chinese vases.' Before I could decide whether I wanted to continue ignoring him or not, he was off and I felt quite irritated with myself to discover that I had accepted a cup of steaming-

hot tea from such a show-off.

It's difficult to ignore somebody when he/she has a story that you are dying to hear. So by the time Rajan returned, I'd decided to be polite as long as he didn't show off too much. He made himself comfortable on the rocks beside me and began his story as if we'd been chatting with each other all our lives.

'We were discussing the Chinese vases, right?' I nodded, and he continued. 'You probably know that the Vijayanagar empire was so powerful and rich that countries from all over the world sent their ambassadors to this court . . .' Rajan paused to see if I still looked interested. 'One day, it was the king's birthday. And all the noblemen and ambassadors began competing with each other over who would give the king the gift he'd like the most. You know how wealthy the king was . . . he had the best precious stones and jewellery, the finest horses, and clothes that came from all over the world. So he usually preferred unusual, rather than expensive, gifts. It turned out that the Chinese ambassador was able to make Krishnadevaraya very happy. Those days, porcelain was precious. Only the Chinese knew the secret of creating such beautiful, delicate chinaware. So after all the gifts were presented, everybody declared the four large vases from China the best birthday gift any emperor could hope for. Naturally, the fat old

Chinese ambassador left the court very pleased with himself. He was sure that the king would now sign any treaty the Chinese emperor wanted! And Krishnadevaraya left the court equally pleased, with four attendants, each carrying a precious vase to the royal chambers.

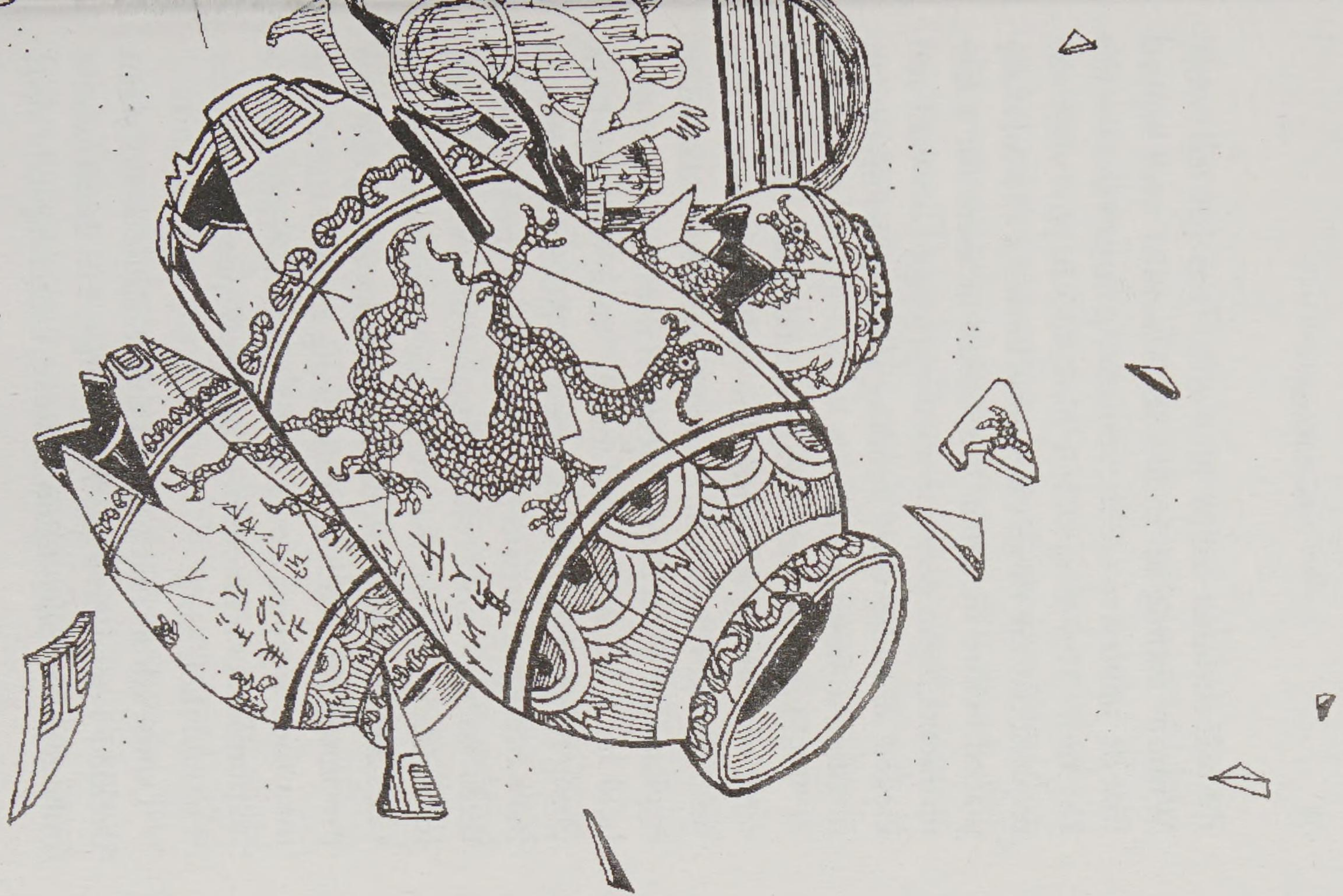
'The head of the housekeeping department was summoned and ordered to make sure only the most gentle workers dusted or cleaned the vases. But in India, most royal chambers were filled with silver goblets, gold plates and brass statues, all of them unbreakable—any clumsy servant could wave about a duster, even knock over a silver plate, and nothing would happen. So none of the palace cleaners knew how fragile these Chinese vases were. Within a week, disaster struck.' Rajan suddenly stopped and looked around. Then, without a word, he got up hurriedly with his tray. I was most annoyed to have my story interrupted like this. I was sure he was showing off again and acting important. Then I realized everybody had finished their tea, and it *was* this boy's job to collect all the empty cups and return them to the shop. 'Wait for me, I'll be back,' he said as he rushed off. This time he didn't sound pompous . . . just friendly.

I decided to wait. Underneath that show-off, there seemed to lurk a rather good storyteller! He was back

in ten minutes and jumped straight back into the Tenali Raman story. Obviously his tea-shop duties took up so much of his day that he had to somehow fit in bits and pieces of his storytelling into the short intervals he got. 'Yes,' he said, breathlessly, 'The finest of the precious vases crashed to the ground and broke one morning. It happened while the royal chambers were being cleaned. As expected, the king was furious. The worker responsible was called and reminded that he *had* been warned that any breakage of the Chinese vases would result in death. The poor man admitted his mistake, but since it was an accident, he begged the king to forgive him. The king showed no signs of mercy. The man was to be hanged the next day.

'When Tenali Raman heard about this death sentence, he was determined to prevent it. Loyal servants of the palace couldn't be killed for such minor offences, he felt. He also thought the king attached far too much importance to the gifts given by the foreign embassies. Tenali Raman decided the king needed to be taught one important lesson—that a human life is more valuable than a vase.

'That night Tenali Raman visited the poor worker in prison. He spent just five minutes with him and came away rubbing his hands, looking very content. The next day, just before the man was to be hanged,



the executioner asked him what was his last wish. Without batting an eyelid, the doomed man replied that he wanted to see the remaining three vases for the last time. The king didn't look too happy with the request, but the three vases were brought and carefully placed before the man. He looked at them for a few moments, then, without warning, lunged forward and kicked all three vases, sending them crashing down, smashed to smithereens!

'The king flew into a rage. He couldn't understand what was wrong with this man—first he'd broken one vase, and now three more were gone! He demanded an explanation from the condemned man. The poor man held his head high and replied, "Your Majesty, I am going to die for breaking one vase. After me, it would have been just a matter of time before the remaining three vases too got broken. Imagine three more people losing their lives for those Chinese vases! Now that the vases are all gone, I can die in peace, knowing that I've prevented three others from being hanged later." The man then stepped closer to the gallows, ready to face his punishment. The entire court was speechless as they watched their king.'

I must admit that I found this a fabulous story but decided I wouldn't tell Rajan that. His head would only get all swollen again. Instead, I interrupted. 'Yes, I

know the rest . . .The king realizes it is Tenali at work behind the scenes.The worker is forgiven and the king showers Tenali Raman with gifts . . . Right?' Rajan nodded, a little disappointed that I had snatched the end of his story from him. I felt a bit mean doing that. He continued, drawing stick figures in the mud with his big toe, 'That's my favourite story about my great, great, great ancestor,' he said. Now I was confused . . . Who was his great, great ancestor, I wanted to know. He looked up, surprised. 'Don't you know?' he asked. 'It is Tenali Raman, of course. He was my great, great, great, great, great-grandfather. Didn't you see the name on my father's tea shop? He's Tenali Ramachandran and I am Tenali Rajan.'

I was terribly impressed and had to work hard again not to show it. Here was a descendent of the great Tenali Raman actually *chatting* with me! I wondered what my friends would say to *that*! Then something else struck me . . . Do direct descendants of historical characters qualify to be part of the 'My Month in Hampi' report, I wondered.

Naturally there was no way I'd tell Rajan about putting him in my report. He'd be unbearable after that. Instead I decided he needed to be put in his place a bit. Trying to sound as grown-up as I could, I said a little scornfully (but not very truthfully), 'Oh, I've heard

millions of these Tenali Raman *stories*. What I'm interested is in *real* history . . . You know, his poetry and his influence in state matters.' The moment the words were out of my mouth and I saw Rajan's confused expression, I hated myself. Why was I being so mean to someone I could enjoy being friends with? Thankfully Mama wasn't around to give me a lecture on good manners.

When the Royal Poet Was Snubbed

I soon realized I had made a serious mistake by demanding to know about the historical details of Tenali Raman's life from Rajan. First, I was ashamed at my own bad behaviour, which made me even more irritated with Rajan. And then, Rajan began bombarding me with zillions of 'historical' or 'poetry'-related stories about his great, great . . . grandfather.

As we met more often, I got to like him more and more. And I really began to look forward to those short breaks that Rajan got from his tea-shop duties. I started calling him TJ, short for Tenali Junior. When I asked him if it was okay, he laughed. I think he was flattered and felt that TJ sounded a lot more grown-up than Rajan.

I'm not going to write down the stories the way TJ told them, because the poor chap was interrupted so many times. He got called away by either his father or one of the customers at the shop just when he settled down to telling me a nice story. This one about Krishnadevaraya's poem was interrupted *four* times by the same person—the arrogant driver of the tourist coach. It made my blood boil the way he ordered TJ around, asking for extra bhajjis, more chai and yet more chai. The worst part is that bus drivers don't pay for what they eat or drink. The rule seems to be that since they bring a coach full of customers to the tea shop, they are entitled to everything, free! So here is the story, minus the umpteen interruptions.

We all know King Krishnadevaraya was himself one of the best poets of the Telugu language. But even the best poets often don't have a very good sense of timing.

That was the mistake this king–poet committed. Once, he just *had* to share his excitement at completing a poem and rushed off with his pages of verse to Queen Tirumaladevi's chambers. He did not realize that reading poetry to your wife, just after she's somehow managed to put her naughty child to sleep at the end of a long and tiring day, may not be a good idea.

The poor lady was polite enough, and since she too loved poetry, sat up eagerly to listen. It was a very good

poem, no doubt. Her husband really had a clever way with words. She smiled at the poetic phrases and shook her head sadly at the tearful parts. There were even lines that made her laugh out loud, much to the delight of the king. But she'd had a long day, and this royal poem showed no sign of ending!

There were times she caught herself almost nodding off to sleep, but luckily her husband was so engrossed in reading out loud that he did not notice. She gave herself a hard pinch, sat up straight and tried hard to concentrate on the words. She knew her husband well. This session wouldn't end with a mere reading. He would want her opinion on each and every verse. She'd better be alert and ready with some intelligent answers!

But it was no use. Her exhaustion won over the king's beautiful verses. And horror of horrors, after a while when the king looked up, he found his wife yawning!

The poet in King Krishnadevaraya was mortified. Was his poem so boring that the queen, usually a very good judge of poetry, just couldn't stay awake through it? But those feelings lasted just for a few seconds, before the ruler in him asserted himself. And then he was furious! How *dare* anybody yawn when a Royal Composition was being read out by the very king himself, he fumed.

Poor Tirumaladevi looked up groggily just in time to catch the fury on her husband's face. Now *that* jolted her awake! But it was too late. The king had rolled up his precious poem and was already storming out of the room in a huff. The poor lady stumbled after her husband to apologize and reassure him about his poetry. But his athletic long strides took him out of her room, down the corridor and into his chambers, much too fast for her. She reached his door, just to have it slammed on her face and hear the bolt violently click on the other side.

A day passed, and then two. The queen made various attempts to apologize to her husband. She sent him innumerable messages through her attendants. Though he politely accepted her notes, he never replied to them. She got his favourite dishes cooked and sent to him. The king ate and enjoyed the delicacies, but continued to pout and sulk. In the end, she urgently sent word for Tenali Raman. She was sure only he would be able to help her.

Now Tenali Raman was in the middle of enjoying a very tasty meal that *his* wife had prepared for him. So he was not very happy to be interrupted by messengers from the palace. But when he realized that it was the queen in need of his help, he reluctantly decided not to have a second helping, and rushed off.

Arriving at the palace in all this haste and secrecy, Tenali Raman was convinced that the king had fallen seriously ill. Why else would the queen be in such a state of panic? So, though he did not show it, he was quite relieved and tickled when he finally heard the real reason for the queen's summons—a yawn that had upset the emperor of Vijayanagar! Tenali Raman immediately saw a way to resolve this problem. But he had to be polite and waited till the queen had listed out all the ways she'd tried to make up with the king—all the tasty dishes she'd had cooked for her sulking husband. At the mention of food, Tenali remembered the delicious meal he had left half finished. He decided it was time to head home. He begged the queen to stop worrying and leave the entire matter to him, which he swore he'd sort out. Then he hurried home in time for a second helping of the lunch the queen had interrupted.

The next day at court, the serious topic being discussed was the poor wheat crop. The minister of agriculture was trying to give various reasons for the shortage, but had no idea how to prevent it from recurring the following year. At this point, Tenali Raman stepped forward and dramatically held out a few grains of wheat in his open palm for everyone to see. He announced to the court that these grains were

of a very rare variety. Tossed into a patch of land along with a handful of cow dung, they would grow and yield enough grain to feed the empire!

The courtiers usually welcomed Tenali Raman's pranks during serious business. After all, that was the jester's job, wasn't it? He had to relieve the boredom of long hours at court. So they all sat back, happy to forget about the depressing wheat crop for a while, trying to guess what he was up to this time. The king was the first to react and asked Tenali Raman to tell the court a bit more about his magical wheat grains. The jester paced around and then, looking very worried, replied that his plan was guaranteed to work, but the king had to help him. These grains of wheat had to be planted *only* by someone who had never yawned in his life. Could the king send out a search party for this remarkable person who could then immediately start planting the following year's wheat crop?

The king burst into laughter. He was joined by all the noblemen and ministers. Naturally, no one had ever heard of someone who'd never yawned. Krishnadevaraya teased Tenali Raman about this foolish request for help. Where on earth did Tenali expect the king to find such a person, he wondered. Tenali stopped his urgent pacing, then thoughtfully rubbing his chin, he looked at the king in surprise and said, 'It's very strange that

you say that, Your Majesty, because the queen has informed me that yawning is considered a crime in our kingdom!'

Everybody, including the king, looked perplexed. But in a moment, Krishnadevaraya's face cleared and he seemed to understand what Tenali Raman was driving at. He nodded slowly before replying, 'Oh, if the queen has got the wrong impression, then it's my duty to correct her . . . I shall do so today itself.'

Tenali Raman looked pleased. He knew that by evening the king would have not only accepted Queen Tirumaladevi's apologies, but would have himself apologized to her for his unreasonable expectations. It was only the courtiers who were left disappointed. They had no idea what the king and clown were nodding happily to each other about. After all, isn't it irritating to be told the beginning of a joke and then be left guessing the ending?

An Incomplete Poem

TJ's Tenali Raman stories are full of jealous courtiers trying to get the better of the famous jester, or worse, trying to turn the king against him. Tenali Raman angered so many people because not only was he quick-witted and funny, he was also one of the king's favourite poets. Such was his popularity that a number of senior ministers were green with envy. What made the court seethe with jealousy was the amount of reward money someone like Tenali Raman earned. When his sharp mind exposed some corrupt official, the king presented him with a heap of gold coins. His clever but funny words often revealed the folly of the king's own policies, and when Krishnadevaraya realized that it might cost the treasury a huge sum of money, the grateful king

would remove whatever jewel-encrusted necklace he was wearing and hand it to the jester.

Now, being funny is actually quite difficult. Try it if you can. Having a sharp, witty answer ready for every occasion is tougher than writing poetry. This was what one disgruntled minister for the waterworks discovered to his great shame. He'd spent weeks planning on being funny at court. He was determined to compete with, and win against, Tenali Raman. But every time he tried cracking a joke, nobody laughed! That's a terrible feeling, isn't it—when you have to explain to an audience *what* the joke actually is! After a week of nobody responding to his 'wit', the minister decided to retreat and try his hand at poetry.

He sat up nights, penning lines that rhymed, all in praise of the king's bravery and great talents. Soon he was pretty sure that his days of being showered with gold had begun. But when he got the verses read in court (luckily, he'd taken the precaution of claiming that it was the work of an anonymous poet), the response was horrifying. All the laughs that the minister had prayed for while trying to be a clown, were showered upon his precious poetry! The courtiers were rolling on the ground, guffawing at the verses of this anonymous poet. And even the normally 'very-polite-to-poets' king had tears of laughter streaming down his cheeks.

The minister was in shock. How was he ever going to get wealthier than that too-rich-for-his-own-good clown? He shuddered to think what might happen if anyone ever discovered that *he* was the true author of those verses. That very night, all his jottings and rough copies of his painstakingly written 'poetry' were burnt. And just when the man had resigned himself to being a mere minister, with only a couple of big palaces to his name, his luck seemed to change.

From his servants he heard that an old poet from one of the remote districts of the empire was on his deathbed. This man had been famous as a poet in the neighbouring kingdom. But because he'd stubbornly refused to dedicate any of his poetry to the Vijayanagar king, many patriotic noblemen at the court had ensured that he never got an audience with Krishnadevaraya. The minister immediately smelled opportunity here.

The moment the old man died, the minister's flunkies managed to steal all the unfinished manuscripts from the house. Within a few days, the minister suddenly found he had about a couple of excellent, long prabandhas, or epic poems, in his hands. Finally, here was his chance to relaunch himself at court, as a poet to match any Astadiggaja. The only problem was that the old poet had died without completing these poems. Quite forgetting the hoots of laughter that his first

poem had earned at court, the minister completed them himself that very night.

The next day, the minister was very silent at court. With sheaves of poetry tucked under his arm, he was playing the part of the poet to perfection. When discussions on matters of the state were over, he cleared his throat and begged the king for a few moments of his time. And right there, in front of a packed court, he read out what he claimed was his own poetry.

This time, the minister relished the audience's reaction. It was one of stunned silence, followed by wild appreciation. When he paused to turn a page, his colleagues began to applaud and the king himself got up, walked over to him and embraced him! It was a heady feeling.

The new 'poet' didn't even have to complete his reading. (This was lucky because nobody got to hear those terrible verses that he'd tried to complete the poem with!)The king summoned the treasurer and the minister was presented with a brass plate piled high with gold coins. Now that ought to have been quite enough for the first day's work as a fraudulent poet. But the sight of all that gold made the minister reckless and greedy for more. Without another thought, he boasted that he had more compositions ready and pulled out the second long poem, which he hadn't

had the time to 'complete'.

After apologizing to the king that the poem still needed an ending, he once again began reading to a rapt audience. This poem seemed even better than the first and the king was moved to tears. He turned towards his court poets and was surprised to see Tenali Raman hurriedly leaving the room. Following the king's gaze, other courtiers too noticed the jester's hurried departure and immediately came to the same conclusion. They all felt that Tenali Raman was furious at being overshadowed by a new talent.

The poem was a long one and Tenali Raman returned before the minister had reached the last verses. Now he seemed to enjoy the poetry just as much as the other courtiers. The minister soon ended his reading, sighed and turned to the king. 'Your Majesty, give me a few days and I will be able to complete my work and dedicate it to your great name,' he said, bowing low. The king was so impressed by the work that he was seriously thinking about adding another 'elephant' to the court's Astadiggaja, when Tenali Raman stepped forward with his own sheaf of papers.

'Your Majesty,' he addressed the king, 'let me complete that poem for you!' This got the king a bit irritated. As a poet himself, he knew that no composer of verse liked his work to be meddled with. And though

Tenali Raman *could* probably complete that poem on the spot, the king felt that he ought not to try and take away any credit for the minister's hard work. Tenali Raman immediately sensed the king's mood, so he continued, 'Your Majesty, that poem was completed by its original composer, poet Sankusala Narasimha, who died last week. It has been in circulation in the neighbouring kingdom for the last four years, and is dedicated to the goddess at the Sringeri temple. How the minister for the waterworks planned to rededicate that work to you, I have no idea!' Turning to the shocked crowd, Tenali Raman then proceeded to read the rest of the poem . . . right up to the end!

We won't go into the expression on the king's face, or on the face of the minister. All you need to know is that the brass plate piled high with gold coins was sent right back to the treasury. And the treasurer looked most pleased when that happened. *He'd* always believed that rewarding poets with state gold was a terrible waste of money.

Tenali Raman Meets His Match

I got this story about Tenali Raman not from TJ, but from one of Mama's *Monuments* magazine friends. And TJ was most upset when I repeated it to him! First he refused to believe it. Then he went on to suggest that even historians are known to be jealous of Tenali's great intelligence . . . and so his protests went on. Well, it *is* one of those rare incidents where Tenali Raman was outwitted, so I can see why TJ is upset about such a story circulating.

With eight star poets at Krishnadevaraya's court, competition must have been fierce between them. At the palace, Tenali's quick tongue had no rival at all. But when it came to the written word, it seems that the 'eight elephants' were pretty well-matched as poets. One

day an argument broke out between our hero, the poet–jester from the village Tenali, and another poet from the village Atukuri. The exchange of rude words and clever verses went on, much to the entertainment of the courtiers. But frustratingly, no winner seemed to emerge from this battle of poets. Finally Tenali Raman challenged his rival. He declared that even if the *entire* village of Atukuri put their brains together, they wouldn't be able to write the Ramayana within five days!

Now the poet from Atukuri was considered very good. But creating good poetry is like making pickle—you cannot speed up the process. So the men and women of Atukuri alternately cursed Tenali Raman for his arrogance and fretted about the shame which would fall upon them. They'd been very proud of the poet from their insignificant village, who had made a name for himself at court. But now it seemed that not only him, but their entire village had been insulted. Worse, all Atukurians privately *did* feel that even if they all got together, writing the Ramayana in five days was impossible.

All, except Atukuri Molla. She was the daughter of a potter. In the sixteenth century, members of the poorer artisan communities rarely had access to education, especially the women. But Atukuri Molla's father was

a very religious, educated and broad-minded man. He was passionate about learning and had passed on his love for literature to his daughter. So while the rest of Atukuri got into a panic, this brave woman from the tiny village took up the challenge Tenali Raman had thrown in court.

Unfazed by all the nervous fretting that had spread like an epidemic through her village, she locked herself away in the temple and got to work. When Tenali Raman heard *who* had taken up his challenge, he roared with laughter. For days he entertained the court with jokes about what a mere woman (and from the illiterate potter community at that) could possibly be capable of. He joked about how she might have got mixed up between the words, 'pot' and 'poet'! But Molla heard none of this. She was busy with her assignment. Of course, other Atukurians *did* hear these insults and seethed with rage.

Day One passed, then Day Two. The old men of Atukuri took to pacing up and down outside the temple compound, hoping to get some word from Molla. They just needed to know how she was progressing. But she refused to talk to anybody. Day Five dawned and Atukuri looked like a ghost town. Most villagers believed that they had already lost the challenge. What could one poor potter's daughter do, after all, in five

days. They resigned themselves to the whole empire laughing at them. A few hopefuls were loitering around the temple, when they saw Molla emerge. She looked relaxed and even smiled at them. Yes, she had completed the entire Ramayana in 138 shlokas!

The news spread like wildfire: Molla had saved the honour of the village. And Tenali Raman, who had never been beaten in court, had to admit defeat to a village potter.

Molla scored over Tenali Raman on another count, too. The court poets often wrote in very high-flown Telugu. So the innumerable versions of the Ramayana written by the Astadiggaja could only be read by the educated city-dweller. Molla, however, wrote her Ramayana in the everyday spoken language of the commoner. So her work was read and enjoyed by thousands and thousands who couldn't follow the court Telugu. You could call the Molla Ramayana a sixteenth-century best-seller!

There is another story about Tenali Raman and the Ramayana that TJ approves of. And it also involves a woman!

In the sixteenth century, it was common practice to invite renowned poets to either recite or sing the Ramayana to large crowds. Noblemen and wealthy tradesmen often organized such functions at their

homes. Tenali Raman was very much in demand for such occasions. Not only was he a good poet, he was also sharp and quick. So he often improvised his verses on the spot, depending on the crowd he was reciting to, adding humour and local stories to what could sometimes become a boring recital.

There was a famous dancer who lived in the capital. During the Mahanavami festivals when the city came to life, poetry recitals were very common. Tenali Raman naturally had the busiest schedule. Apart from the recitation invitations, he also had all his court duties to complete. In the middle of this hectic running around, a messenger from the dancer came to Tenali Raman. She wanted him to recite the Ramayana at her home. Tenali Raman was forced to refuse because he just didn't have the time. But the dancer was a determined woman and wasn't going to accept his refusal. She pestered him with invitations, and a steady stream of messengers started arriving at Tenali Raman's doorstep. This went on till one morning the normally easy-going jester lost his temper. He decided to accept the dancer's invitation and landed up at her home that very evening.

There, in front of a crowd of her guests, Tenali Raman poured oil around her house and set it on fire! The dancer and the guests were aghast. But Tenali Raman

rubbed his hands together gleefully and walked off. He was only re-enacting the 'Burning of Lanka' scene from the Ramayana, he told the furious hostess!

Sun-baked Eggs

HAMPI, 11 SEPTEMBER 2005: I tentatively slipped off my sandals and tested the rocks with the tips of my toes. I squealed in horror! That the earth could actually get as hot as an oven fascinated me. This temperature-testing has become a ritual ever since Mama demonstrated to me what the heat of Hampi's rocks could do, a few days back. Returning from photographing the Lotus Mahal in the pink light of a stunning sunrise, Mama had excitedly woken me up. 'Suleeeeekha,' she begged. 'Get up quickly, I've got an idea!' Struggling out of sleep, I was in two minds. Mama's ideas usually turn out to be fun, but I don't like busy and overactive mornings. I wondered if this idea could wait until a little later. 'No, it can't!' Mama was quite sure about that.

In ten minutes, I was ready and racing down the slope which led to the Tungabhadra River. I found Mama waiting for me with a bowl full of eggs! In response to my surprised look, she just smiled mysteriously. I knew that no amount of cajoling would get an answer from her. So I followed in silence, making up a list in my head of possible uses for the eggs. We reached a hilly area near the river where all the greenery had given way to sheets of rock, laid out over the hillside like some mythological dhobi's washing. It felt like an afternoon kind of heat even though it wasn't even eight o'clock yet.

Mama handed over the eggs to me and bent down by the edge of the rocks. She began scooping up a heap of sand. 'Oh, I'll do that,' I offered, even though I had no idea what the eggs and the sand were for. Between the two of us, we managed to make a tidy pile of sand out in the middle of a rock surface. By which time I'd had enough of the suspense. 'Mama, you just have to tell me or I'll burst!' My mother laughed. 'Why, I thought you'd have guessed by now . . . We're going to have sun-baked eggs, Sulekha!' She flattened out the sand pile a little and I excitedly buried each egg in the sand. After making sure that none of the eggs were exposed, we stood back to admire our makeshift oven. I couldn't really believe that the eggs

would cook in the sun. 'Are you sure this is going to work, Mama?' I asked, because some of Mama's bright ideas *have* been disasters in the past. But she was already jogging back to the guest house. She had no time to waste before she had a quick breakfast and left to complete the next part of her photo assignment.

We set off after a hurried meal. I checked for all the things I needed to worry about—yes, my sun hat was on, I had dabbed a little coconut oil on my head, and in my sling bag there was a bottle of water and a full snack box . . . I felt all grown-up and important helping Mama with her photography equipment—she never trusted anybody else with her lenses and tripod. 'Mama, if these rocks get hot enough to cook eggs, how on earth did people live here?' I wondered aloud.

Mama took her time replying. She gets all dreamy when she talks about things she loves, and strange as it sounds, history is her first love! 'Actually, Sulekha, every day while we're out shooting those beautiful monuments, sweating away in the heat, I often ask myself the same question. Why did three dynasties of Vijayanagar kings—the Sangamas, the Saluvas and finally the Tuluvas—choose to live in this oven?' She turned to me. 'What do *you* think?' she asked. I looked around. We were at that moment at the top of a hill, and the ruins of Hampi were spread out in front of us. I took a

guess. 'Maybe because the place looks so beautiful in . . . in . . . in such a different way?' Mama seemed to agree. She had told me once that in all her trips up and down India, photographing historical sites, she'd never seen such a dramatic landscape. She now said, 'Of course, we are looking at the city 400 years after it was abandoned . . . it probably had more trees and greenery in the sixteenth century.' But I wasn't so sure about that. 'Mama, in this heat, and with so many rocks around, how could trees ever grow properly?' Now that remark was a silly mistake! I'd given myself away.

Mama pulled on her 'teacher' look and wagged her finger at me. 'So, Sulekha my girl has not done her homework. If you'd read that little booklet I'd given you, you'd know from the accounts of the Portuguese and Chinese travellers of that period that this city was beautiful. They were all praises for the lush orchards and gardens.' I felt like kicking myself for getting caught. The book Mama had given me *was* lying unread, at the bottom of my bag. But books are such boring places to learn about history. All they talked about were the wars, the sizes of the armies, the people who died in combat . . . Roaming around Hampi as Mama and the team of photographers shot pictures of the ruins had been more interesting than any book on history. Though, ever since I'd become friends with TJ,

I'd forgotten all about my promise to write an essay on Vijayanagar's history.

Mama knew about my dislike for all war-related details. 'The rulers of Vijayanagar were not just warriors,' she reassured me. 'They were also poets, architects and builders. The rulers spent enormous amounts of money building the fifteen-mile long Turuttu canal that diverted water from the river, right into the city. So I can imagine Hampi as a much greener place.' She looked at me to see if she'd got me interested. But by then we'd reached the famous elephant stables where the day's shooting was to take place. The other photographers and assistants were already setting up their equipment. And *there* was TJ, busy scrambling over rubble, delivering hot tea to the team.

Before I ran off to meet him, I wondered, 'Mama, can I show Tenali Junior our baking eggs?' Mama couldn't hide her amusement. 'Is that what he *insists* his name is?' she asked. I nodded seriously, not keen on getting into this argument again. 'Now how on earth can a tea-shop owner's son claim to be related to *the* original Tenali Raman?' said Mama, with a teasing smile. I didn't like anybody laughing at my friend, so I felt I'd better give Mama the truth. 'Actually he *is* related, Mama! His father's name is Tenali Ramachandran . . . didn't you see the sign on his tea stall? And his

grandfather was Tenali Raghuraman . . . they're all from the village called Tenali!'

I couldn't make out if Mama was serious or kidding when she said, 'And his great-grandfather's name must have been Tenali *Ravindran* . . .' I gave her a careful look. But she changed the subject and went on, 'If you kids get impatient and keep uncovering the sand, all the heat will get lost and the eggs won't cook. So why don't you ask your Tenali Junior to join us when we walk back for lunch. The eggs will be ready to eat by then.' I ran off.

'Vi-ka-ta-ka-vi'

HAMPI, 13 SEPTEMBER 2005: Tenali Junior had reached the shade of his father's tea stall, when I walked down the hill to the shop. I'd hoped for at least a whole hour to chat with him before the tourists began to arrive. Then he would get busy delivering tea, bhajjis and bondas to the crowds. Yesterday evening he had started telling me a most interesting story about Tenali Raman, when a busload of tourists had descended on us.

I flung my bag on the ground and plonked myself in the shade beside him. I was dying to know the rest of the story. 'So then what happened?' I prompted him cheerily. 'Oh, half of them left without paying!' TJ replied angrily. I was startled, and when I looked up, I saw he was almost in tears. 'Who? Pay *whom*? I meant what

happened to Tenali Raman in your *story*.' TJ flung a few pebbles into the mud. 'Oh *that* . . . I was talking about the last bus yesterday. They ate a whole pile of onion bhajjis and most of them disappeared without paying me.' He looked up worriedly. 'Appa's going to shout his head off . . .' I was horrified and could think of nothing to say that would help. But suddenly remembering his great, great, great-grandfather seemed to cheer up TJ. He sat up, with a determined effort to forget his anger at the tourists.

I was relieved to see my usually cheerful friend brighten up and quickly gave him his cue. 'You'd just started telling me how bright Tenali Raman had been as a boy and how impressed the sanyasi had been by him.' TJ grinned mischievously as he got into the storytelling mood. 'Yes, very bright . . . just like me!' I groaned, rolled my eyes skywards and pretended to yawn. I was wondering whether it was better having TJ all depressed than like this! He laughed at my expressions and settled down to some serious storytelling.

'I was telling you about the wandering sanyasi who passed through the village of Tenali. He'd never seen a boy as smart as Tenali Raman. So the sanyasi taught him a mantra and explained its incredible power to him. If Tenali Raman ever wanted something really

badly, the sanyasi said, all he had to do was go into the forest, search for the shrine of Goddess Kali and begin reciting the mantra. The sanyasi promised the young boy that when he'd finished chanting the mantra three million times, Goddess Kali would appear before him.

'Now, did I tell you that Tenali Raman was from a poor family?' I nodded. 'Just like ours,' he added, but I protested. '*Your* family is not poor!' TJ laughed, he enjoyed getting me all hot and bothered! I wasn't going to let him get away with that remark, though. 'I know your father has two bigger tea shops on the other side of Hampi. And you yourself told me that he has bought a mini-van for guided tours!' I'm sure he'd forgotten what he'd told me about his family. 'Okay, okay,' said TJ, giggling, 'Just adding some masala to the story, that's all.'

He continued in a more serious note, 'Tenali Raman's mother could not afford a good education for him. He'd seen her plead with the wealthier Brahmins of the village to teach her son, but they all refused. So with only the mantra to help him, Tenali Raman left home for the forest. There, at Kali's shrine, he began his chanting. I don't know how long he took to do it, but sure enough, the determined chap managed to recite the mantra three million times. And as promised by the sanyasi, Goddess Kali appeared in front of him.

'Now most people would have shuddered at her appearance. You try to imagine a thousand heads, all snarling at you with teeth and tongues sticking out. But Tenali Raman burst out laughing! The goddess naturally was furious—*I* would have been if some little village boy laughed at my face! She wanted to know what the joke was about. Still laughing, Tenali Raman told her what had tickled him. He couldn't imagine what she'd do if she caught a cold! For humans who had only one face, two hands were never enough to keep a dripping nose dry. So, Tenali Raman wanted to know, how the goddess, who had a thousand heads, managed with only one pair of hands when she had a cold? Now that's the kind of joke that you or I could giggle about, but the goddess was *not* amused. Furious at being laughed at, she cursed Tenali Raman. As a punishment for daring to laugh at her, she said, he would only be able to make a living through laughter. She raved and ranted that for all his intelligence, he would be known only as a mere clown or a *vikatakavi*.

'Forgetting the seriousness of the curse, Tenali's sharp mind was instead hooked on to the word *vikatakavi*. He instantly figured out that it was a "both sides word".'

I sat up. 'A "both-sides-word"? What's that?' I wanted to know. TJ hesitated. I could see that he knew there was a special term for what was on his mind, but he

didn't know it. He tried explaining, 'You know, those words that sound the same if you read them from left to right or right to left . . . like "Malayalam"?' I immediately understood what he was thinking about and was glad for a chance where *I* could be the knowledgeable one! 'That's called a palindrome,' I said importantly.

TJ tried out the new word, rolling it off his tongue a couple of times for practise. He was quite pleased with it, and continued, 'The goddess was used to people crumbling with fear under her very gaze or begging for forgiveness if she ever cursed them. Remember, Kali is the goddess everybody is supposed to be petrified of. So though she was first rather irritated at this giggling village boy, soon she had to admit that she was also impressed by a brat who could play around with the very words of her curse!' Something in the story made me look closely at TJ. It was at that very moment I decided for sure that he was *really* directly descended from the original Tenali Raman. You see, TJ was also just the kind of person who would giggle cheekily at a fiery goddess with a thousand heads! They had to be related, even if it was across a few centuries.

Quite unaware of my thoughts, TJ continued, 'So on her own, she changed her mind. Since she couldn't cancel the curse completely, she modified it. Tenali

would never be any ordinary clown, but a jester to the king! And that's exactly what he *did* become.' And here the storyteller changed his voice, making it deep and grown-up like. 'He became the famous court jester in the court of one of India's greatest rulers—Krishnadevaraya. *My* great, great, great, great-grandfather—the world-famous Tenali Raman!'

I giggled. I'd rather enjoyed that story, marvelling at Tenali Raman's guts to dare laugh at Goddess Kali. I was about to prod TJ for another story, when we heard the blaring horn of the first tourist bus arrival. Story hour was unfortunately over! I'd have to go looking for 'Experts on History' instead.

The Dream Palace

HAMPI, 15 SEPTEMBER 2005: Lunch time had been too busy for TJ. He couldn't leave the tea stall and dash off with me to check if the hot rocks had baked the eggs as well as the last few days. After hounding a few experts and taking down some boring notes for my project, I dozed off in the shade, waiting for whenever TJ managed to get off.

By sunset, both of us had triumphantly unearthed the eggs, and sure enough, when we cracked them open, all of them were firmly cooked! Immensely pleased, we headed to the guest house and pleaded with the cook to make us a quick egg curry. The mere thought of it made me so hungry that I was loitering around the kitchen when Mama returned from her day's work.

Mama too was incredibly excited. A few days back she had sent off some rolls of film to be developed, with a colleague who was going to Bangalore. And her prints had now arrived. All three of us pored over the large photographs taken two weeks ago. They were exquisite shots of the royal centre of Vijayanagar. They had all come out beautifully!

Everyone knows that Mama's favourite building is the Lotus Mahal, mainly because it is one of the best preserved. But still, I really began to get irritated as she flipped through sheaves of Lotus Mahals—photographed from the north, and then from the south. Then more pictures of it during sunrise and then at sunset! Then some blow-ups of the building at night, lit up by diyas. There were even some shots of the building in the rain! Mama ran her fingers along the lines of the building's arches, cooing, 'Look at this, Sulekha. What an exquisite mixture of styles this building is . . . The floor plan, the nine pyramidal towers and the double-curved eaves projecting out around the whole building . . . all inspired by Hindu temples; while these arches and interior vaults and domes have been borrowed from the neighbouring Sultanate styles.' Oh no! This dreamy tone of Mama's was dangerous!

TJ and I exchanged worried looks. If we didn't change the topic soon, Mama could go on for hours

about 'the beauty of Vijayanagar buildings'. But TJ was quick to come up with a most appropriate Tenali Raman story that made Mama laugh and forget all about architecture.

'Oh, this reminds me of the king's dream palace,' he began seriously. 'I wonder what style it would have been in, *if* it had gotten built.' Mama looked startled because she was supposed to be the expert on the buildings of Hampi, and how come *she*'d never heard of this palace?

TJ enjoyed Mama's confusion for a few moments before sitting down to tell his story. 'Oh, Auntie, you don't know about it because *it never got built!*' Mama looked relieved. She hated the idea of an entire building going unnoticed by her! TJ winked at me as he continued, 'And that was all thanks to Tenali Raman.

'You see, it all began when my great, great, great, great grand ancestor had gone off for a holiday to our village, Tenali. One morning Krishnadevaraya woke up in an extremely good mood because he'd had a very pleasant dream. He assembled all his courtiers and in great excitement told them about this palace he'd seen in his dream. It was the most beautiful building ever, and he threw open a challenge to the court. Whoever built him this palace of his dreams would be paid 25,000 pieces of gold.'

I was getting immersed in the story, but I couldn't figure out whether this was a genuine Tenali Raman story or one that TJ was just making up along the way, only to stop Mama's Lotus Mahal lecture. 'So, is 25,000 gold pieces a big amount even today?' I asked. Mama frowned, 'I'm not sure if it could build a dream palace now, but 400 years ago, it certainly was more than enough.'

TJ didn't approve of these interruptions, so with a disapproving look in my direction, he continued, 'You know how people are. There were some sensible courtiers who felt that there were already more than enough palaces around—the king certainly didn't need to waste the state's money on another. And there were those who couldn't wait to get their hands on the 25,000 gold pieces for themselves.

'The greedy ones jostled through the crowd to get right into the front rows. There they made the most outrageous promises to the king. Oh, the dream palace would be ready within weeks, they swore. If the king gave them an *immediate* advance of 12,000 gold pieces, they could start the following day and avoid the monsoons, they promised. And the ambassadors from the Persian and Chinese courts would spread the stories of the palace's beauty, all over the world . . .' Here I butted in. 'But how did these builders even know what

this palace was supposed to look like? They couldn't have peeped into the king's dream, could they?' I giggled at the idea that someone could 'eavesdrop' on a dream!

'Exactly!' said TJ, 'Which just shows you what cheats they were. And without Tenali Raman around to expose these crooks, the king looked all set to dole out large quantities of gold from the state treasury.

'Now these were the times when even the enemies of Tenali Raman missed him. If he'd been around, none of this would have happened. But there was no way to get him back from his holiday in time. The sensible courtiers resigned themselves to yet another grand palace that nobody really needed. Though their king was a great warrior, and a just and generous ruler, there were times when his behaviour was really quite silly, they felt.

'The next day, just when arrangements were being made to transfer the huge quantities of gold from the treasury, a very old man rushed into the court. He was poor and looked very upset. The king had a soft heart, so everything came to a standstill as the monarch patiently asked the poor man about his problems. But the man was speechless, and kept looking around him in terror. The king realized he was reluctant to talk out of fear of some important person in court. So he reassured the man, "Don't worry, old man. I, the King,

give you my personal guarantee that no harm will ever come to you. Speak without fear!" At these words, the old man relaxed.

"'O King, last night I was robbed of all my life's savings. Now I don't know what will happen to my old wife and two children," he wailed. The king lost his temper, "Who are these thieves that won't spare even an old man? Do you suspect anybody?"

'The man gave a nervous laugh, before continuing, "Thank God you assured me of your protection, Your Majesty, otherwise I might have been scared to reveal the culprit's identity. You see, last night I realized that I was the owner of a huge chest of treasure. The best jewellery, only diamonds and gold, mind you, that anybody had ever seen. Naturally things like this can't be kept a secret. So my poor old wife couldn't help boasting to the neighbours about our sudden good fortune. And that was enough. Our neighbours told *their* neighbours, and the news travelled like wildfire right up to the palace." The courtiers were tense and restless by now, as they expected the culprit to be exposed any minute.

"'Now, Your Majesty, I have to confess, that the person whom I saw in my dream, taking away the chest, was none other than you, sir!" There was a stunned silence before the king roared, "You fool, you have the

gall to accuse *me*, the king, based on a *dream*! Don't you know that your treasure does not even exist in the first place?" Turning to the court, he laughed, "Will somebody tell this fool that dreams are not real?"

'The old man looked dejected. "My wife told me that, Your Majesty, but I felt *you* of all people would understand my sorrow at losing my treasure. After all, you too just had a dream that you believe is the truth." The king was struck speechless. And as the courtiers exchanged embarrassed looks, the "old man" reached up and removed his wig. It was none other than Tenali Raman, just back from his holiday!

'As you can imagine, the ridiculous plans to build the dream palace were immediately cancelled. The king ruefully admitted that it had all been a silly idea. And in private, he thanked Tenali Raman for saving him 25,000 gold coins!'

I looked at Mama and heaved a sigh of relief. She'd forgotten all about 'Vijayanagar's beauty' and had got as lost in TJ's story as I had been. If TJ could distract Mama, it meant he was really a very good storyteller!

My Project Begins

HAMPI, 18 SEPTEMBER 2005: Mama has been getting quite hassled about the lack of progress of my history project. More than a week has passed since we arrived at Hampi and she can see no signs of the report. The worst part is that my school principal, who is usually a dragon when it comes to giving us kids leave, had been very excited. She'd felt that since *Monuments* magazine was sending a team of historians and photographers to interview the archaeologists excavating at Hampi, I could meet and learn from the experts themselves. And I have lately learnt some worse news, my principal wants me to complete my 'expertly written' Hampi project and *present it to the whole school*! And I haven't even begun! All I've been doing is helping out TJ at the tea

stall and listening to his interesting stories about Tenali Raman.

All these days, though Mama's colleagues have been very kind and polite to me, they've all been so busy. How does my principal expect me to stop these important professors as they go about their work and ask them silly questions for my project? These grown-ups . . .! But today, as we all sat down with our packed lunches beside the elephant stables, old Professor Bhat plonked himself tiredly beside me. Professor Saab, as everyone calls him, does not work for the magazine but is with the Archaeological Survey of India. He was part of the team that excavated the stunning queen's bath in the 1980s. And since then he's been hoping to find the royal horses' stables. Ever so often, I've heard somebody or the other tease him, 'So, Professor Saab, have you found your precious horse stables?' And the old man always smiles and replies that he's still looking.

So when he peered into my lunch box to see if I had something more interesting than he did, I tentatively asked him, 'Professor, why have you spent so many years looking for the royal horses' stables?' He seemed very pleased that I'd asked, and settled back to reply. I offered him some of my favourite tamarind rice out of politeness and was quite shocked at how much he took. As he

savoured my puliyogere, he pointed his spoon at me, 'Did you know, young girl, that the might of the Vijayanagar army rested not on their elephants, but on horses imported from Persia?' I looked surprised and turned questioningly towards the impressive elephant stables right there in front of us. But the old professor shook his head dismissively. 'Those huge beasts were just for style—like the big limousines that rich people drive. Can you take out a huge car to go to the market every day? No place to reverse in most Indian roads,' he snorted. 'Elephants were like limousines, just for temple functions, grand parades and other ceremonial occasions—pretty useless on the battlefield. Yes, the fleet-footed Vijayanagar army depended on thousands of horses.'

Now, I had assumed that fabulous, well-trained horses were native to India, but I was wrong. They came from Persia, and to import them continuously from such a distance was a logistical nightmare. 'Oh, it wasn't *easy*!' the professor declared. 'It was hugely expensive, but the empire could afford it.' I was surprised to learn how the best horses from Herat and Hormuz in Persia were first acquired by Arab horse traders. Then this precious, prancing cargo was shipped to the west coast of India, landing in what is today Kerala

and the Konkan coast in Karnataka, Goa and Maharashtra.

'And their job wasn't over yet,' continued the professor, his mouth full of rice. The traders then *walked* the horses up the Western Ghats, and down into the Deccan Plateau, into Vijayanagar. I was horrified . . . the poor animals! 'Oh listen to the rest of it, my dear girl.' I realized too late that this was the professor's favourite topic. 'The kings of this empire did not want the Arab traders to supply horses to any of their rivals in the south, like the Bahmanis. So they paid a higher price, and paid in *gold*!' By now, he was holding his lunch which was quite forgotten in one hand, as he continued in a voice that was suddenly all high-pitched in excitement, just thinking about the past. Professor Bhat looked quite a sight. He waved his box of curd rice as he spoke, sending bits of curd flying. I had to repeatedly wipe my face and hair as I listened to the professor carry on.

'Of course, by the time of Krishnadevaraya, the Arab traders were out of the horse business,' he said, with a dismissive wave of his hand. 'You see, the Portuguese had discovered the sea route to India and had set themselves up very comfortably in Goa. From there, they took control of sea routes across the Arabian Sea. And they had an exclusive trade deal with Vijayanagar—

they would supply horses to no one else!' As I sat munching on my lunch, my heart went out to those horses—how many must have died travelling those miles over sea and land.

'Among all the handsome stallions from Persia, naturally only the best would be picked for the king's private stable. Can you imagine the beautiful stables he must have built for them?' I agreed. I now understood why this old man was so keen and hopeful of finding these stables 400 years after the empire had collapsed. 'And all the horses became the king's property the moment they landed on the west coast. So even those that *died* walking over the ghats, had to still be *paid for* by the king.' At that, even *I* forgot about my food! Noticing my expression, the professor laughed. 'Yes, imagine paying in gold for a dead horse!' My mind boggled at how big the king's stables would need to be to fit in all the horses from Persia. But Professor Bhat seemed to read my mind. 'The king picked only the best for himself, and the rest were handed over to generals and noblemen to maintain and train for war.' With that, he snapped his still-half-full tiffin box shut and walked off abruptly, chuckling to himself.

Suddenly even *my* lunch didn't look so interesting any longer. It seemed more important to run off and share everything that Professor Bhat had told me with

TJ. I have written it all down before I forget. This might be one of the bits of 'expert knowledge' I'll be able to put into my project.

The Mysterious White Horse

Sometimes, catering to the whims and fancies of a powerful king could be quite exhausting. This, the Portuguese discovered one fine day when their biggest customer, King Krishnadevaraya, threw them a challenge. He suddenly decided that he wanted to own a pure-white horse—a horse that would stand out dramatically against the other dark-coloured cavalry horses. He had other demands too! The horse had to be taller than the average horse since it was meant only for the king to ride into battle. Krishnadevaraya had just returned from a successful military campaign in Orissa, and before setting off to another war the following month, he expected his dream horse to be delivered at his capital.

The Portuguese got into a panic. Emissaries were

immediately sent off to Persia in search of this creature of a king's dreams. Some local merchants who had trade links with the neighbouring kingdoms sent out their own agents to look for a white horse. The king, after all, was willing to pay anything for it. Luckily, the Portuguese were able to buy a couple of stunning-white horses in Hormuz, and these were immediately shipped across the Arabian Sea to India. During the arduous journey, as it often happened, one of the pair died. But the Portuguese were relieved to be able to deliver one priceless white mare to Krishnadevaraya, just a few weeks before his next battle. The king was so excited by his new mount that it was rumoured he paid out double the sum that he'd earlier offered.

As the day of the battle drew nearer, the king could be seen practising endlessly on his white mare. He wanted the horse and himself to be perfectly comfortable with each other before going into this crucial fight. Every day he returned to the palace, thrilled with the performance of his new acquisition. Not only was his white mare a beauty fit for an emperor, she also had tremendous speed.

But the day that the king and his army were to leave for battle, the white mare disappeared from the stables! As you can imagine, the king was absolutely furious. He raved and ranted at the grooms for not

being watchful. The king's Chief of Security was summoned and threatened with certain death if the horse was not found. But for all the threats and foot-stomping, the precious white mare could not be traced before the king's departure for battle. Seething with anger, Krishnadevaraya mounted his earlier favourite, a black stallion, and rode off to battle.

The military commanders huddled together for an emergency meeting. They were nervous that in this angry mood the king might do something reckless on the battlefield. But they needn't have worried. Krishnadevaraya, one of the most brilliant warriors in Indian history, forgot all about his precious white horse as the battle raged.

In the midst of the fight, however, out of the corner of his eye, the king suddenly noticed a white horse streak past him. From the colours on the rider, it was clear that it was a Vijayanagar nobleman astride it! For a moment the king wondered if *this* was his missing horse, but surely, none of his noblemen would have dared to ride it in his presence? Still pondering over this mysterious rider, the king was shaken out of his thoughts by a huge commotion. A group of enemy riders broke away from their unit and began chasing the rider on the white horse. Within seconds, they were able to close in on him. The king realized this was not

his mare—she would never have got tired so fast. As the horse slowed down before the king's eyes, the riders fired a barrage of arrows into the rider and sped away. The body of the rider slumped forward and the horse cantered away.

The king felt a steely cold fear momentarily grip him before he went on to rally his troops. He realized that the enemy had expected him, the king of Vijayanagar, to ride into battle on a white horse. And had chased that rider and killed him, thinking him to be the king!

Well, the battle was won by Krishnadevaraya, and when the king returned to his palace exhausted, he was stunned to find that his own white mare was back in her stall at the royal stables—very contentedly munching on a carrot. And right beside her was Tenali Raman, thoughtfully staring out across the hills of Vijayanagar.

The king immediately knew that it was his jester who had saved his life, and without a word, embraced him. But after the emotional moment, as the two of them walked back to the palace, the king insisted on knowing the details. Tenali Raman was quite happy to reveal his successful ruse.

'Your Majesty, if I had begged you not to ride the white horse, you'd never have listened to me; you were

besotted by her. Yet, too many people—from the Portuguese traders to the neighbouring sultans—knew about your obsession for the mare. So, first of all, I "kidnapped" your precious horse. Then I got one of the old horses from the stable painted white . . .' Tenali Raman had a mischievous twinkle in his eyes as he discussed the horse's disguise.

But the king had a worried frown on his face, 'Who was the poor nobleman who agreed to ride on the horse, knowing fully well that he would be killed? Who was this loyal person willing to give up his life for me?' Here, Tenali Raman burst out laughing, and bending down, picked up a handful of hay from the ground. This he handed to the king! 'There,' he said. '*That*, Your Highness, is your "brave and loyal" nobleman—a dummy, a scarecrow that I fashioned out of straw, dressed up in a nobleman's uniform and tied onto the old horse!'

The king threw back his head and laughed at the sheer brilliance of Tenali's plan. Not only had his jester fooled the enemies, he'd also fooled his *own* king!

Horses for Sandalwood

Since the king passionately loved his horses, anybody wanting a royal favour often gifted him a good stallion. But the priceless Persian variety was not easy to find. For Thimmappa, a wealthy trader from the city, who needed a lot of concessions and favours from the king, his lucky chance occurred during a fair.

Vijayanagar was famous for its elaborate festival celebrations. Apart from the nine-day-long Mahanavami festival celebrated in September, the annual fair around the ninth-century Virupaksha temple attracted traders from all over the world. This was the occasion when the people of the city celebrated Goddess Pampadevi's marriage to Lord Virupaksha, or Shiva. The streets around the Virupaksha temple came alive to

performances, processions and a lot of trading. Ceramic vases and silks from China; pearls from Hormuz; emeralds and other gems from Ceylon, all entered the city. And these the international traders would exchange for diamonds, gold jewellery, sandalwood and teak.

As Thimmappa ambled through the crowds wondering what special gift he could buy to impress the king, he noticed a foreign trader leading three good-looking Persian stallions. This was his chance, he realized, and immediately struck up a conversation with the man. He was from the Delhi Sultanate and hoped to barter his three horses for sandalwood, rosewood and teak. Since the trade of horses was strictly regulated, Thimmappa first checked if the trader had paid his border toll tax. Sure enough, he was shown the receipt. The deal was soon completed and both men went their separate ways. Thimmappa, full of excitement, headed straight to the palace to woo the king.

Unluckily for him, he was spotted by a minister from the court, who had a grudge against him. Before he knew what was happening, the minister had Thimmappa arrested and produced before the king on the charge of smuggling horses. Poor Thimmappa pleaded his innocence, stating that he'd bought the horses *for* the king, and swore that the trader whom he'd bought it from had paid the high taxes on imported

horses. But when the minister summoned the border tax collector, along with his ledger, there was no record of any Delhi trader crossing into Vijayanagar territory with three horses.

Thimmappa was sentenced to three years of imprisonment, much to the delight of the crafty minister. His poor wife was heartbroken. She pleaded before the king, but on the subject of horses, the king took a very firm stand. He refused to change his mind. Her only hope now was Tenali Raman, whom she begged to save her husband. She was lucky, because at the Virupaksha fair, Tenali Raman himself had spotted the north Indian trader leading his three stallions. So *he* was pretty sure of Thimmappa's innocence.

He first asked the lady to stop crying and sat her down. He then dictated a letter to her. It was addressed to the minister of trade at the Delhi court. And it accused the Delhi trader of having cheated Thimmappa! In the letter, Mrs Thimmappa complained that the trader had taken two tons of sandalwood from her husband with the promise that he'd pay for it the moment he returned to Delhi. But weeks had passed without any payment. Could the Honourable Minister kindly help her, she enquired in the letter.

Now the Vijayanagar and Delhi monarchs shared good trade relations, so the Delhi minister decided it

was best to make a quick investigation. When the trader was contacted for questioning, he was furious at the false accusation. His reputation was being ruined, so he set off for Vijayanagar in a huff, determined to sort out the matter. At the court, he complained to King Krishnadevaraya and produced the receipts for the toll tax that he'd paid at the border, proving that he'd acquired the sandalwood in exchange for horses he'd brought into the country.

Thimmappa's enemy, the Vijayanagar minister, was summoned and so was the border tax collector. This time, the king himself checked the records. Sure enough, on the day that the Delhi trader claimed to have entered the kingdom, there was a record of taxes collected for three Persian horses!

Thimmappa was soon a free man and the king thanked him for the gift of the three stallions. After banishing the lying minister from court, the king still had one question bothering him. He invited Thimmappa and his wife back to the court and, in the presence of everybody, heartily congratulated Mrs Thimmappa for her very clever letter to the Delhi minister. But the lady was not only honest, she was also very modest. She was so grateful to have her husband back that she wanted his real saviour to get all the credit. She told the king that it had all been Tenali Raman's idea!

The King Who Stole a Statue

HAMPI, 21 SEPTEMBER 2005: Of all the photographers and archeologists at Hampi, I think Mama is having the hardest time. She's the only one who's brought along her child! So not only does she have to keep me out of mischief, but also make sure I'm up to date on that report that just doesn't seem to get started! And then there is the very important matter of *food*. All these years, Mama used to be so proud of my appetite. Among all my friends, I'm the only one who doesn't fuss—all my friends' mothers call up Mama just to tell her how nice it is to see a child (that's me!) who eats vegetables happily. So I'm not complaining about the government guest house cook. He is great for breakfast, lunch and dinner. The problem is with the food for *in-between*

meals—there is *none*! How is a growing girl like me supposed to manage without cakes, murukkus, halwas, pedas and other important snacks? Poor Mama tries to nip into the guest house kitchen when the cook is not around and stir up some of my favourite snacks. She's petrified that I'll eat all the stale fried stuff from those open carts.

Which is why I thank god for Dr Ela Chowdhury. She's a geologist. But more importantly, she is a great cook! With it being the Navratri period, Auntie Ela is busy doing what all good Bengalis do—praying to Goddess Durga and making Bengali sweets! These she brings to whichever spot Mama is shooting for the day. She always has one big box of say, rasmalai, for everybody, and a separate little dabba for TJ and myself.

Yesterday she took me with her to the Virupaksha temple. She seems quite sad that she's away from her own children and grandchildren during this important festival. As we walked around the temple, I discovered that, for a geologist, she knew a whole lot of history! She told me that the Virupaksha temple was initially only a temple for Goddess Pampadevi—the name of the town Hampi comes from her. Her shrine was famous even in the ninth century, long before the Vijayanagar empire was built. Pilgrims came from all over India to worship her. The legend is that when Shiva was

meditating close by, Pampa fell in love with him and he married her. As her husband, a shrine for Shiva, or Virupaksha as he is called here, was added to Pampadevi's temple. Over the years, as Shiva's wife, she came to be identified as Goddess Parvati, which is also another avatar of Goddess Durga. So now I understood why Auntie Ela had been coming here, every day, for the last week—this was the closest she could get to performing her Durga Puja.

With the steady supply of sweets throughout Durga Puja, I looked forward to Auntie Ela's arrival every evening. By then she'd have finished with her own field studies and would be ready to go to the temple. Also, there was always that little extra snack for TJ and me. Today TJ was able to join us because his father was at the tea shop. I was glad he did because Auntie Ela was brimming over with exciting stories.

After we finished the arti at the temple, we sat down outside with our snack. The place was full of pilgrims. Auntie Ela smiled, 'Can you imagine that people have been coming here for over a thousand years?' I tried to think what they might have been wearing thousand years back, but Ela Auntie threw up another interesting bit of history. 'And did you know that *this very* spot is where the Vijayanagar empire was born?' I most certainly didn't know that! I'd have imagined one of

the palaces at the royal quarter as a more fitting place for south India's most powerful medieval empire to spring from.

But Auntie Ela even had the exact birth date. 'On 18 April 1336, the brothers Harihara and Bukka, the founders of the Sangama dynasty, had their coronation at this temple.' As she went on with her story, I was rapidly filing away every word of hers in my memory. All this sounded like precious pages to fill my report with!

Harihara and Bukka had been two local chieftains, carving out territories for themselves as the earlier Hoysala and Chola kingdoms collapsed. But at that very time, the Delhi Sultanate, under the Tughlak dynasty, was trying to establish its presence in south India. The brothers were captured and taken to Delhi, where they converted to Islam and worked for Muhammad bin Tughlak. A couple of years later, when the region around the Tungabhadra again rose up against Delhi, the sultan felt it was a good idea to send the brothers down as his generals, to stamp out the rebellion. Harihara and Bukka did that so successfully that they decided to set up a dynasty of their own!

Here, in a predominantly Hindu region, as the brothers began establishing themselves, their religion set them apart from their own people. It was a renowned

Hindu sage, Vidyaranya, who is said to have convinced Harihara and Bukka to return to their own religion. So on that day, almost 700 years ago, Vidyaranya not only brought the brothers back into the Hindu fold at the important Virupaksha temple, but he also crowned Harihara as the new king.

After hearing this story, the temple suddenly felt a lot more exciting! Auntie Ela continued, walking on and waving her hand at us to follow her. 'The kings of Vijayanagar felt this temple was so important that even Krishnadevaraya held his coronation here . . . Look at that hundred-columned hall. He built that in 1510.'

TJ was lost in all this history. 'What about that beautiful Krishna temple? How many thousand years have people worshipped there?' he asked Auntie Ela. 'Oh, that's quite new. Krishnadevaraya built that after he defeated the Gajapati rulers of Orissa. Historians rate that victory as one of the most brilliant of the century. And,' she turned to us with a twinkle in her eyes, 'where do you think he got his idol from?' Both of us looked blank. Auntie Ela laughed, 'You must remember that kings are not angels . . . As the army returned from Orissa, this idol of the baby Krishna was stolen from the Udayagiri fort!' To think that a mighty king like Krishnadevaraya could stoop to *stealing*! Really! And I wondered what the 'fair and just' Tenali

Raman thought about *that*?

It was dark as we walked back to the guest house with Auntie Ela. All her stories were churning around in my head. I knew Mama was going to be thrilled with the details I'd put into my report tonight. What a bonus Auntie Ela is—so much information for my homework, packaged along with all those delicious sweets!

The Statue That Vanished

The king had returned victorious from yet another battle. Yet more large tracts of the Deccan Plateau had been added to the Vijayanagar empire. Krishnadevaraya was deep in prayer at a thanksgiving puja at Goddess Pampadevi's shrine, when he thought he heard a voice.

Naturally, when he'd entered the temple, he'd been with his queens, a few select courtiers and innumerable ministers. But when he opened his eyes in answer to that voice, he found himself alone! He turned around, wondering about his family, when the goddess herself stepped out from behind a pillar. As the surprised king prostrated at her feet, she spoke. 'You were brave on the battlefield and your victory is as much through your efforts as through our blessings,' she said gently. The

king was overcome with emotion as the goddess continued, 'To ensure that luck and the gods favour you in all your future efforts, I suggest you build Lord Virupaksha a temple of his own.' The king could only nod in agreement, for he found himself tongue-tied in the goddess's presence. When he stood up and opened his eyes, he found his family and friends around him, just as before. They were all deep in prayer, and it seemed that nobody else had seen the vision.

Krishnadevaraya was a devout and religious king, so he got to work immediately. He announced that a new temple for Shiva, or Virupaksha, would be built within the month. He instructed one of his trusted ministers to look for a good site to start building. The minister remembered an old, crumbling and abandoned Shiva temple in the adjoining forests, and along with a team of workers, began clearing the spot. Everybody agreed that this scenic spot would be ideal.

One day, as the workmen were sorting through the rubble of the old foundations, one old mason unearthed a statue. And he was thrilled to discover it was of Shiva! Having been buried in the mud for probably decades, it was blackened, but anyone could tell that the carving was exquisite. In order to check what the statue was made of, the old man trotted off to the river to give Lord Shiva a good scrub. And there he met the minister,

seated under the shade of a tamarind tree, watching the work progress. The minister joined the old man by the river, and within seconds realized that the statue was made of gold!

The greedy minister immediately stopped the mason from scrubbing off any more grime from the statue. He suddenly seemed to remember that it was a priest's job to do that. As he reached out and took the statue from the surprised mason's hands, he began lecturing the old man about the proper religious procedure to be followed. Re-anointing a statue that had not been worshipped for god knows how long, he explained, was a very important ritual that only Brahmins could perform, and so on he rattled to the perplexed mason. Within minutes, the minister had summoned his carriage and was riding off towards the city, with the statue tucked safely under his arm.

Days passed, and then weeks. But the old mason never heard of the statue he'd discovered in the forest. In fact, when the king announced a competition inviting sculptors to create the most magnificent Shiva ever, the mason became suspicious. The minister had whisked the statue away in great haste, and the mason was not an old fool. He'd recognized, even before the crafty minister had, that the statue was made of gold. So, with his secret, he set off to meet Tenali Raman to clear his

doubts. Tenali Raman listened to the entire story in silence and reassured the old mason that he was not to worry. Before the week was out, the gold statue would be installed at the new temple, he promised. But he made the mason swear that he would not talk about the episode to anybody.

A few days later, when all the sculptors were assembled in court to listen to the king's instructions, an old sage was ushered into the king's presence. Krishnadevaraya was a little irritated at being interrupted in the middle of his temple project. So he politely asked the sage if his business could wait till after he'd finished with the sculptors. The sage, who seemed weary from walking a great distance, sank to the floor, in apparent exhaustion. And in a frail voice, said, 'Your Majesty, I've travelled hundreds of miles to reach you on time—*before* the new Shiva statue is sculpted.' The king looked surprised. Raising his voice, the sage went on, 'A few days back, Lord Shiva himself appeared to me in a dream, begging me to stop the creation of a new idol!' Krishnadevaraya was stunned. Hadn't the goddess herself appeared to *him*, the king, with instructions to build a new temple? Was this some family feud between Goddess Pampadevi and her husband, Lord Virupaksha? Popping up like this in

people's dreams, giving opposing instructions to poor mortals?

The sage seemed to sense the king's dilemma. 'Your Majesty, you were instructed by the goddess to build a new *temple* for her lord. The reason why Shiva appeared to me was not to stop the temple, but to tell me that a very special idol of himself already exists.' The courtiers began to look more and more confused. 'The statue is made of gold and is at this moment in the minister's house.'

Everybody at court turned enquiringly towards the minister, who looked most uncomfortable . . . but that was only for a moment. He recovered his wits quickly enough to step forward and address the king. 'Your Majesty, last week a statue of Shiva was unearthed at the site of the temple. Before presenting it to you, I wanted to have it cleaned and a special puja performed for it. Now it is ready to be installed.' At these words, the sage rose, 'In that case, my job has been done . . . I can now return to the forest to my meditation.' Without waiting for a response from anybody, the old man turned and left.

The following week, at the temple inauguration, while everybody else had their hands joined in prayer, Tenali Raman caught the eye of the old mason and winked! He thought the secret he shared with the old

man was safe, till he felt someone tug at his sleeve. He turned to find the king at his elbow. Krishnadevaraya looked very serious. 'I was very disappointed when nobody could trace the old sage—I wanted him to be present for the temple inauguration. But somehow I have this feeling in my bones that he's here in our midst . . . probably in disguise . . .' His voice trailed off as he gave his jester a knowing smile.

A Priceless Bowl of Water

Life was not easy for the king of Vijayanagar. For example, just when the rebellion of the Reddys from Kondavidu was suppressed to the north, Adil Shah of Bijapur would decide to conquer Raichur. Once that was recaptured, yet another Tamil chieftain would decide to reclaim some old territory in the south. And so it went on, twenty years of Krishnadevaraya's reign were virtually spent on horseback, fighting one war or the other.

Surrounded by enemies, the king needed all the help he could get from the gods. So he spent a lot of energy on pilgrimages, visiting important shrines in the different corners of his vast empire. Every victory (and he had many) was immediately followed by a thanksgiving

trip to some special temple. After his famous battle of the Orissa kingdom, Krishnadevaraya and his wives Tirumaladevi and Chinnadevi visited Tirupati. There they dedicated their victory to Lord Venkatesha.

On one such trip to Amarkantak, on the banks of the River Narmada, the king was accompanied by a number of noblemen from the capital. And luckily for the war-weary king, Tenali Raman was there to pep him up. As the royal entourage finished their prayers at the temple, the king decided to have a dip in the river. It was a cold winter's day, so while all the other noblemen, eager to please their monarch, dived into the river with their teeth chattering, Tenali Raman rubbed his chin thoughtfully and decided to excuse himself from the freezing waters. The dripping noblemen were irritated to discover that Tenali Raman had escaped. Not only was he warm and dry, but he'd also pleased the king very much by offering to keep guard over all the royal party's belongings!

Further down the river, a sage sat deep in meditation. With all the worries about war campaigns on his mind, the king could never resist a sage. He immediately walked down the riverside after his bath and lay prostrate before the holy man. Naturally, all the noblemen, not to be left behind, also scurried after the king and lay themselves down at the feet of the sage. All this bowing

and prostrating resulted in quite a commotion, which disturbed the old sage and he opened his eyes. He instantly recognized the king.

The sage was not one of those polite sycophants who tell kings exactly what they want to hear. Looking around at the large crowd of noblemen surrounding him, he decided that if he didn't finish with the king soon, he'd never get back to his meditation. From experience, he knew that members of the court were a nuisance. They never left a sage alone until he'd made some prophecy or the other. And noblemen virtually *demanded* that those 'prophecies' were only good ones!

Looking straight at the king, the sage said, 'You've been at war for so long that I can tell that your treasury is empty. The kingdom is almost bankrupt!' Having had Tenali Raman at his court, the king was quite used to direct and honest opinions. He nodded sadly in agreement. It was true. This last war, though a great military victory, had cost the treasury a lot. The king dreaded going back to Vijayanagar and sitting down with his finance minister to balance those terrible accounts. He quietly asked the sage for his advice.

The holy man immediately directed the king to go back to the river and collect a bowl of water. That seemed easy enough. The king returned with a vessel, filled to the brim with water. The sage held it in his

hands, said a few prayers, sprinkled some powder over the water and then handed the vessel back. He instructed the king to carry the pot with him to his capital. There he was to sprinkle the water over the vaults in the treasury. Once that was done, the sage assured the king, the situation in the country would change dramatically. The coffers would fill up within the month! The king's face lit up with relief and gratitude. But the look was soon wiped off the royal face by the sage's next instruction.

Not a single drop of water was to spill! Between the long and arduous trip from Amarkantak to Vijayanagar, even if a single drop of the now-magical water spilt, the sage's powerful boon would not work. Silently, the king cursed himself. If he'd only known that earlier, he would not have filled water right up to the brim. Now he was stuck, but he had no choice. Carefully balancing the bowl in his hands, he still managed to touch the sage's feet, thanking him for his blessings.

The royal party was by now so engrossed in their new dilemma that they quite forgot to ask the sage about their own personal problems! The old man was free to slip back into his meditative trance. But as the group returned to where Tenali Raman was peacefully snoring by the river, they had reached a state of panic. *How* were they to follow the instructions of the sage?

Arguments broke out amongst the nobles and there were even some who suggested to the king that he just say a prayer and throw the water right back into the river. These pessimists felt the *not* spilling was impossible.

All the noise woke up Tenali Raman. Embarrassed at being caught fast asleep when he was supposed to be on guard, he leapt to his feet. Within seconds he silenced the crowd by offering to carry the water back to the city himself. Now the king did have enormous trust in Tenali Raman's talents but this sounded crazy. In any case, he was relieved to hand over that precious water to someone else's care.

On the long journey back, Tenali Raman's enemies kept passing by to peer into his palanquin. They expected him to be sitting deep in worry, protecting the precious, treasury-filling water. But Tenali Raman showed no signs of worry. In fact, he spent most of the journey asleep!

At the end of the journey, the king summoned Tenali Raman. At the outskirts of the capital, all the noblemen waited for the court jester. They were quite sure that he'd landed himself in a mess this time. But Tenali Raman arrived, striding into their midst, all smiles. He reached into his bag and casually took out the vessel.

The king and the crowd were stunned by Tenali Raman's simple solution. All he'd done was place a

wooden lid on the bowl and sealed the edges with wax, making it watertight! Not a drop of the holy water had spilt.

The king congratulated him heartily. And instead of showering Tenali Raman with a heap of gold coins (remember, the treasury was empty!) he removed his priceless emerald necklace and garlanded his ingenious, utterly clever jester with it. There were some noblemen who turned the same shade of green as those beautiful stones. This was *not* how they'd hoped the story would end!

A City Inhabited by the Gods

HAMPI, 26 SEPTEMBER 2005: By the time we came to the end of Navratri, Auntie Ela had taken us to nearly all the temples and holy places in Hampi. I never thought I could deal with so many gods, all in one go—but the boxes of sweets Auntie Ela packed for each visit turned everything into a picnic. I noticed that I was not the only one taking down notes when this cool grandmother-cum-geologist-cum-historian-cum-mithai-maker rattled off her facts. TJ too came armed with his notebook! I teased him that he was only interested in taking down the recipes for Auntie Ela's delicious sweets, which he would then sell in his tea shop and make lakhs of rupees. TJ laughed—he thought that too was a good idea, but he really wanted

to take notes of the historical details Auntie Ela told us. It was his ambition to become a tourist guide. He wasn't very happy helping out at the tea shop. Whenever his father was not around, the tourists bullied him and often didn't pay for things they'd eaten.

According to Auntie Ela, the gods lived in this city long before the kings came along. In the Ramayana, Kishkindha, the monkey kingdom of Hanuman's leader, Sugriva, was spread over the boulder-filled valleys of what later became Vijayanagar. She even took us to a cave which locals believe was where Sugriva hid the jewels Sita dropped from the air, as she was being abducted in Ravana's chariot. Among these precarious rocks, Rama and Lakshmana fought and defeated Vali, Sugriva's brother, who had usurped the throne. At the ancient Kodhandarama temple where Auntie Ela took us, Lakshmana is supposed to have put the crown of Kishkindha back on Sugriva's head. One evening we picnicked at Malyavanta Hill, where Rama and Lakshmana spent an entire monsoon, waiting for news from Hanuman, who was spying in Lanka!

I had felt like a princess all these days, wandering around the buildings that kings and queens had once lived in. *Now*, I felt like a goddess!

It was at the Hazara Rama Temple that TJ remembered a story involving Tenali Raman and

Hanuman. We'd walked into what had once been the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. But now it was empty. All it had was an elevated platform with three holes in it. Perhaps the original statues of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana had once stood there.

Hanuman had a large following in the days of the Vijayanagar kingdom. While this temple compound did have a Hanuman shrine on one side, his devotees felt that the small shrine belittled the Monkey God. They felt that in a city that had once been Kishkindha, the monkey kingdom, their hero Hanuman needed a more important place of worship. There were many who felt that the Hazara Rama temple was the place to put Hanuman in his rightful place—right next to Rama, Sita and Lakshmana, on the same pedestal.

Pressure began to mount in court. Some important ministers were followers of Hanuman and presented their wish to the king. But the Rama devotees in court were equally adamant that a Hanuman statue couldn't be *added* into the sanctuary of the Hazara Rama temple.

Poor Krishnadevaraya was in a fix. He couldn't afford to upset either set of ministers. But there seemed no end to this tussle. Matters got worse when an enormous monolithic statue of Narasimha was completed. The king had commissioned this famous statue for some important generals in his army. The Telugu chieftains

worshipped Narasimha in their homeland, Ahobalam, deep in the forests of the eastern ghats. The moment this statue was unveiled, the pressure from the Hanuman camp increased. If the Lion God could be given so much importance, why not the Monkey God?

Throughout all these petitions and counter petitions to the king, Tenali Raman had remained silent as he watched Krishnadevaraya's discomfort. He knew that before long the king would turn desperately to him for help! Under normal circumstances, an enormous Hanuman temple could have been built and the matter settled forever. But the problem here was different. There were already enough large Hanuman shrines, statues and even giant reliefs of the Monkey God on large boulders. What Hanuman's devotees wanted was for their god to be treated as an equal to Rama or Sita. Which was why they wanted his idol to be added to *existing* Rama temples, rather than build new, separate Hanuman temples.

That evening, even before the king could think of asking for his jester's help, Tenali Raman asked Krishnadevaraya for a private audience in his chambers. The king was surprised, since Tenali Raman rarely asked for an appointment. Was Tenali Raman himself in need of some help, the king wondered. King and clown then spent an unusually long evening together that nobody

in court was aware of.

The next morning Krishnadevaraya made an announcement. He claimed that he had been thinking a lot about the issue of putting Hanuman on the same pedestal as Rama, Sita and Lakshmana, and hadn't come to a conclusion. So he had secretly spent the night out, beneath an enormous carved relief of Hanuman. He had felt that Hanuman himself would then indicate what his wishes were, to the king. The court was silent. Both the Rama and the Hanuman devotees were very pleased with the king for taking the matter so seriously. Which king would ever dream of spending the night out in the open, just to settle a dispute?

He assured his courtiers that he had not put his life in any danger. In fact, he'd made sure his personal bodyguards had watched over him. And sure enough, as he lay fast asleep at Hanuman's feet, the god appeared to the king in his dream. There was absolute silence as the courtiers waited with bated breath for the final verdict.

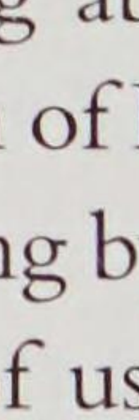
In the dream, Hanuman begged the king to leave him alone! He swore that as the Monkey God he was happier outside, amidst nature, than cooped up in a temple. He told the king that his powers to protect Vijayanagar would be much greater if he was allowed to roam freely through the city, keeping the forces of

evil under control. The king paused as the Hanuman devotees digested the news.

Finally, the king turned to them and asked what he ought to do after such a dream. The devotees all agreed that Hanuman needed to be left alone, just as he'd indicated, and thanked the king for taking so much of trouble over the issue. The Rama camp, in turn, heaved a silent sigh of relief. And so did the king.

That evening, the king asked Tenali Raman for an appointment in *his* house! He came with an attendant weighed down with expensive gifts. And the two friends enjoyed another evening celebrating their clever win at court!

Professor Saab Meets Auntie Ela



HAMPI, 28 SEPTEMBER 2005: Even though Professor Bhat usually had his nose deep in history, I realized he could still sniff out a good meal. Remember how my tamarind rice had been devoured! So all the snacks Auntie Ela kept carrying about for TJ and me must have caught the attention of Professor Saab's nose. One evening we were lounging by TJ's tea stall. There was a box of sweets in front of us, TJ's father had made us some delicious cardamom tea and Mama had just returned panting from the guest house with piping hot samosas, when Professor Saab appeared.

TJ had been very keen on meeting him after I related the professor's lecture on horses to him. But today I

was more worried about the samosas disappearing! The old man settled down to join our picnic. The sun had just set and the ruins looked beautiful. TJ and I exchanged worried looks. This was just the kind of evening to set Mama off on one of her 'The Beauty of Vijayanagar' lectures. I prodded him to quickly tell us a Tenali Raman story, but Mama beat him to it. Leaning back on a rock still warm from the afternoon sun, she said, 'What an eye for beauty those two brothers had . . . to pick a spot like this to build their capital. They must have seen this sunset over the rocks and made up their minds.'

I'd thought Professor Saab was too engrossed in his samosas to have even heard Mama's remark. But he had, and he reacted with the most contemptuous snort! 'Beauty?' he squawked, struggling to swallow what was in his mouth. 'Nonsense! Harihara and Bukka chose this spot with *war* on their minds!' he declared. Poor Mama looked stricken. It was as if someone had accused her favourite kings of a crime. She tried protesting, but the professor was already striding about waving his frail hands, bits of samosa flying in all directions.

'Look at those boulders. Those were used as natural shields against invading armies. The Tungabhadra cut off enemy attacks from the north. And these rocky

ravines meant natural defences all around the city.' Mama tried to get the topic back to 'beauty' by shakily passing the professor the sweets, but he refused to be distracted. 'Nicolo Conti, an Italian traveller who visited Vijayanagar in the 1420s, wrote that a heavily fortified wall of sixty miles enclosed the large city.' TJ looked very impressed. 'The kings were very clever. They saved a lot of money because they only had to build walls where there were no boulders!'

Auntie Ela had just joined us and tried to gently butt in. 'But, Professor, we must first look at the religious importance of this place. It was a pilgrim centre long before the empire was born. *That* must have made the two brothers settle here.' But the professor would have none of that either. He waved away Auntie Ela's argument. 'Abdul Razzaq, the Persian ambassador who stayed here in the 1440s, wrote that the city had seven concentric walls protecting it—with the royal quarter right in the centre, next to the Hazara Rama temple. This was a city that was ready for war, right through the year.'

TJ brought Professor Saab his tea, and he continued. 'Vijayanagar was the closest to a military state in south India. There was an enormous standing army, maintained in readiness for attack. Cavalry, artillery and an elephant corps were kept in perpetual training by

over 200 nayaks, or military commanders, across the kingdom.' Turning to me, he said, 'And remember, young girl, the kingdom stretched right up to parts of Sri Lanka!'

Try as she did, Mama just couldn't get a word in edgeways. Professor Saab certainly seemed to be winning the war versus beauty battle. But Auntie Ela wasn't going to let him off so easily. 'I think you're forgetting where Vijayanagar's wealth came from,' she said. 'It came from trade. This city attracted traders from all over the world. The Chinese, Arabs, Jews, Europeans . . . they all came here because it was very profitable to trade here.' She held up her hand to prevent the professor from interrupting her. 'And you remember, Professor Saab, that only *peace* can encourage trade. This was one of the first empires in history whose navy *guaranteed* protection for foreign ships at their harbours. Piracy in Vijayanagar waters was virtually unheard of!'

Auntie Ela's face was quite flushed, and as she leaned over to help herself to another samosa, I thought she'd finished with her little speech. But no! She'd only begun. Every time Professor Saab tried to cut in with a statistic on war, she came up with an equally impressive historical tidbit, on *peace*! 'Professor Saab,' she wagged her finger at him, 'You quoted those foreign travellers . . . Let me

remind you that all who visited the city wrote more about the prosperity of the people than anything else. They described the jewellery that women wore on the streets. They wrote in *envy* about the food the citizens of Vijayanagar ate. Every visitor who witnessed the Mahanavami festival was at a loss for words to describe the beauty of it all . . . Why, Portuguese visitors who'd seen the capitals of Europe swore that this was the most fabulous city in the world!'

TJ had noticed that Auntie Ela had gotten quite breathless and had quickly got her another cup of tea. This she gratefully accepted, before firing her final salvo at the poor professor. 'So don't you go filling these young minds with stories of war . . . This was a city of peace, where the citizens wore Chinese silks and bought Chinese porcelain vases, where men and women wore necklaces of Ceylon rubies. This was the city where Purandaradasa first formalized the rules of south Indian classical music. The citizens enjoyed art, architecture and, most importantly, poetry . . . Tell me, Professor Saab, do you know of any other emperor who could write such beautiful poems?'

Poor Professor Bhat looked around at all of us, a rueful expression on his face. He hadn't expected frail Auntie Ela to be such a formidable adversary! He helped himself to *two* more sweets, before sheepishly

acknowledging defeat. 'I cannot argue with someone who makes such tasty kheer kadam!' he said, grinning at all of us.

A General's Priorities

Battles are won by great generals and kings. But luck and the weather play a very big role too. The French leader Napolean had great plans to conquer Russia. Yet these were foiled not by an impressive Russian army, but by the terrible cold of a Russian winter.

The Vijayanagar kings knew the power of Mother Nature only too well. After all, they had used her as the city's defences. The Tungabhadra protected the city at its northern boundary. The rocks and ravines provided unimaginable security. But being so close to the river had its disadvantages too. One year, the monsoons lashed the plains of the Deccan Plateau with such force that the Tungabhadra River burst its banks. The floods ruined crops and the homes of hundreds of people.

The rulers of this kingdom were ready for such emergencies. They had witnessed many a flood. The vast resources of the army were used for emergency rescue operations. That year, a famous ex-general, who was currently a minister, was put in charge of flood relief. After the initial crisis had passed, the job of rebuilding had to start. Roads and bridges had been washed away. Some of the famous fortifications of the city had been breached by the floodwaters. Homes had to be rebuilt and farmers compensated for the huge loss of crops. Krishnadevaraya gave the minister in charge of relief operations a clear order. He could withdraw as much money as he needed from the treasury.

The minister disappeared for a couple of weeks. And the king, confident in his ex-general, believed that everything was going smoothly. Tenali Raman, on the other hand, had been getting some unpleasant reports from his friends. So, with determination, he set off on a private inspection of the 'relief works'. He returned shocked at the plight of the people. He was further horrified to find the general in the court, boasting to the king about what a great job he had done. And the king seemed to believe the minister.

Tenali Raman realized that the situation was desperate. He told the king that *if* the relief measures

had all been completed, as the minister reported, then this was the time for the king to visit his people, to personally accept their thanks and to give them the confidence to rebuild their lives again. The king thought this a very good idea. So the very next day, king and jester set off on an inspection tour.

They came to one of the famous gardens of the city. Strangely, all the trees seemed to have been uprooted. The king looked shocked and wondered what could have happened to all of them. Trying not to smile, Tenali Raman said, 'It might have been the floods that uprooted them.' The king looked doubtful. They continued their tour and came to the valley where a number of bridges had once stood. The king had hoped to see the new bridges that the minister claimed to have built. Instead, he found all the trees that had been missing from the public gardens. But they were not standing up erect, instead they were lying across gullies and small ravines, as makeshift bridges! The king was furious. Not only had the minister squandered the money meant for bridges, he'd also uprooted trees that had taken decades to grow, ruining the beautiful gardens. He asked Tenali Raman if he believed that the minister had stashed away all the money meant for relief for his personal gain. But Tenali Raman refused to answer. Instead he asked the king to be patient and make up his mind

only *after* he'd seen everything Tenali Raman had to show him.

Further down the road, Krishnadevaraya got even more upset. Some streets were still waterlogged and there were no signs of the local residents. Tenali Raman directed the king's attention to the treetops. There were the residents, shivering and starving on the branches. In a rage the king rode on, following Tenali Raman, who led him to the outskirts of the city. The fort walls had collapsed in some places, and the king found his minister here, supervising workers who were busy rebuilding the walls. The best material was lying around, and the rebuilding was progressing at a good pace. The minister was running about, attending to the work in such a frenzy, and the king immediately realized that this was not a man who would squander the money from the state's treasury.

After Tenali Raman's clever guided tour the king understood that he had made a mistake in assigning the relief work to an ex-general. As a military commander, his priority had been repairing the city's fortifications. His only worry had been that if the Bahmanis or the Adil Shahis got to know how damaged Vijayanagar's defences were after the floods, they would immediately attack the city. So while he hurriedly rebuilt the bridges with logs of wood, and postponed

rebuilding the houses that had collapsed, he was doing a most thorough job of the wall repairing! He planned to make Vijayanagar impregnable, overnight.

The king turned to Tenali Raman. He wanted to thank his clever and trusted friend for opening his eyes to his own foolishness. But Tenali Raman was looking away, lost in thought. The king commended the general on his speedy work and returned to the court. He immediately assigned another minister to take care of the common man's problems.

A Bankrupt King

The Vijayanagar army had returned victorious after a battle. Krishnadevaraya was especially pleased because his forces had had to take up arms in a hurry. The country had been attacked in the north, and the entire military had been surprised. Yet every nobleman and soldier had fought alongside the king and driven back the enemy decisively. The city had been lit up like it was Diwali night, to celebrate the victory, and there was dancing and music in the streets.

Overwhelmed by his people's bravery in battle, the king decided to have a fabulous banquet for them. He piled the stage with precious gifts for each person he invited and spent a fortune on the food, entertainment, but most of all, on the gifts. He paid special attention

to the gifts and rewards for the family members of those who had died in battle. The widows were given land grants to support their families. Grown-up sons of deceased soldiers were ceremoniously inducted into the army. And medals and swords were given to those who had fought with outstanding bravery.

The king had entrusted Tenali Raman to escort the families of the deceased to their homes after the formal part of the function. This naturally took a long time. While it was a great honour to be invited and honoured by the king, the wives and mothers of dead soldiers still mourned their loss. They wept as they clung to the medals given to honour their lost ones. Tenali Raman too was moved by their sorrow and spent time with each family. In the process, he missed out on most of the celebrations at the banquet.

He missed the dancing. He missed the acrobats and wrestlers. Most importantly, he missed out on the scramble for gifts. As the party had progressed, the king had invited all his guests to pick up a gift from the stage. There had been a mad rush, and the king had looked on, mildly shocked that his noblemen could behave so badly. He made a mental note to remember in future that gifts piled on the stage was not such a good idea.

He looked around to see how his favourite jester

was faring in the stampede. But Tenali Raman was nowhere in sight. Finally, the stage was emptied of all the gifts. Most of the noblemen looked quite pleased with the king's generosity. When the party was almost over, Tenali Raman returned.

His old enemies in court were ecstatic. For once they were sure that Tenali Raman had got the worst gift. There was only one brass plate left on the stage. And when the king asked him to pick up his gift, Tenali Raman was forced to do so. There were sniggers among the courtiers. The man who left court almost every other day loaded with gold coins or other expensive gifts, was stuck with a brass plate while everyone else was flaunting great treasures!

Tenali Raman did not for a moment mind getting the worst gift. But he was furious at being sniggered at and taunted. Determined to turn the tables on the courtiers, he removed the rich brocade shawl that hung over his shoulder (an earlier gift from the king) and wrapped the brass plate with it. In front of the entire hall, he fluffed up the folds of the shawl so that it looked like there was something big wrapped inside. He then put this bundle on his head and walked towards the door.

The ministers were by now chewing their nails with curiosity. And so was the king. What on earth was his

jester up to this time, he wondered. Before Tenali Raman could leave, the king sent his messenger rushing across the hall to stop him. Pretending surprise, Tenali Raman went back into the grand room to meet the king.

Krishnadevaraya couldn't bear the suspense any more and burst out, 'Why is it that you wrapped up the brass plate in your shawl, Tenali Raman?' he asked. Tenali Raman bowed low before replying, 'Your Majesty, I have the greatest appreciation for whatever gift I have been lucky enough to receive from you.' Here the jester paused and waited, making sure everyone was listening. 'Every time I have left your presence with a gift, the people of the city have noted that it's of the highest quality. Sometimes I have not even been able to carry the gold you have showered me with . . . there was so much. I fear that today if I am seen with this plate, the public will immediately jump to the wrong conclusion.' Again he paused, looking very worried. Naturally, the king wanted to know what that 'wrong conclusion' would be.

Looking grave, Tenali replied, 'Your Majesty, every guard who sees this plate in my hand will assume that after the heavy expenditure of the war, the king is now bankrupt, and can't afford to give anything better. Such a rumour spreading through the kingdom would be most dangerous . . .' The king didn't let him go any

further. Unwrapping the folds of the shawl, Krishnadevaraya placed his diamond-encrusted gold necklace on the empty brass plate. Then thumping his jester on his back, he said, 'You can go home now. Let every citizen see Tenali Raman's gift and sleep well, knowing that it will take more than one war to make their king bankrupt.'

Tenali Raman went home a satisfied man and left behind an entire banquet hall full of furious courtiers!

Cooking Counters and Game Boards

HAMPI, 29 SEPTEMBER 2005: I found TJ's father seated at his stall with a long face. That could mean only one thing: no tourist buses or vans this evening! This was good news for me. TJ would be free. And sure enough, he came bounding down the slope, grinning from ear to ear. Today was an 'Egg Day'. The sun had been so sharp in the morning that I'd remembered to bury some eggs near the sheet rocks in the morning. So TJ and I set off to harvest our crop of sun-baked eggs.

But when we reached our 'oven', we were shocked. Someone had dug up our precious eggs! We'd been 'sun-baking' for weeks and this had never happened. Who could it have been, we wondered. I was especially irritated because I'd asked the guest house cook to

keep a lot of fried onions ready, to be tossed with chopped up baked egg and lime. My stomach made loud noises of protest at the realization that our snack would have to be cancelled.

It was then that we heard a familiar hoot of laughter from behind some bushes. And who should peer out but Professor Bhat—clutching our bowl of eggs! I was relieved, but I could see that TJ was not too happy. I could read his mind—he was probably disappointed that the four eggs we usually baked would now have to be shared between three people instead of two! 'I'd noticed you two digging around here over the last few weeks,' Professor Saab chuckled. 'And so decided to investigate . . . I wondered if you kids had found some sixteenth-century coins or something!' He sat down beside our 'oven' and opened his bag. And TJ's face immediately lit up. He had forgiven the professor, who had brought along bananas, biscuits and some chaat masala that he claimed tasted great with baked egg.

Professor Saab has been studying ancient sites for so long that he can think of nothing else. We'd barely polished off the eggs, when he said, 'You know, you two are as clever as the ingenious sixteenth-century citizens of this city.' Both of us looked blank. Professor continued, 'Even over 500 years ago, people here used these rocks very cleverly for food preparation.' He stood

up and led us to the nearby Vithala temple complex. We entered a low-roofed structure in a corner of the complex that I had passed every day and never bothered about. Professor Saab told us it was the temple kitchen. Inside he showed us the ancient 'cooking counters'. The natural sheet rock had been scooped out to form rows of little basins that looked exactly like the masala grinding stone in my grandma's house! In other places, though the rock wasn't hollowed out, we could make out that these too were grinding counters, because of patches where the rough granite had been polished into smooth slicks by centuries of grinding masala! TJ was sure that the hollows were for wet masalas while the flat slicks were spots were dry masalas had been ground by the temple cooks.

After nosing about the kitchen for a while, we stepped outside. I was determined to get Mama and the guest house cook grind some masala on a 500-year-old grinding stone. Now, *that* would be a historical meal! But Professor Saab had already lost interest and was busy leading us up a slope. Abruptly he stopped, and pointed to the ground. Here again, the sheets of stone had some kind of geometric designs on them. Was this also some food preparation idea, I wondered. The professor laughed at my suggestion. 'You only seem to have food on your mind!' he teased.

Squatting down on the warm rock, he ran his fingers over the patterns. 'These were "board games" that people played on the rocks back in those days.' TJ and I immediately dropped to the ground. This was interesting. The professor told us that all across Hampi we would find different games carved onto rock surfaces. 500 years ago people had a lot of leisure time! The professor said that some of the games were still played today, while historians were trying to figure out the rules and origins of others. The one we were peering at looked like a 'board' for Chinese checkers. TJ wanted to collect stones and invent our own game, but the professor was already walking on, calling out to us. There were more things he wanted to show us!

How could such an old man walk so fast? We found it difficult catching up with him. This time though, the professor was also breathless as he plonked himself beside a flat, carved stone that was obviously broken almost in half. He was running his fingers over the undamaged part of the carving, his face pink with excitement. As I took a closer look, I realized why. This stone had horses *and* warriors carved on it! The professor explained that it was a virakkal, or a stone to honour bravery. Whenever a man died while performing a heroic act, these virakkals were erected to honour

him. Usually the scene carved on the stone referred to how the person had died—either in battle, on a hunt or while saving someone's life. From these carvings it seemed that this brave man had obviously died in battle.

Professor Saab offered to take us to the museum the next day, where there was a collection of virakkals, each telling different tales of valiant battles.

That stone got Professor and TJ into a hot argument. Professor Saab teasingly said that Tenali Raman would have had no virakkal erected for *him*, since he wasn't known for his bravery. That got TJ all steamed up! The professor made it worse by comparing Tenali Raman with Birbal, who was known to have fought battles in Akbar's army. TJ was furious. He kept insisting that Tenali Raman was as brave as any warrior. Hadn't he criticized the king when no one else dared? There were a number of times that Krishnadevaraya could have ordered his jester to be either sentenced to death, banished from the capital or made to pay a huge fine. But that never stopped Tenali Raman from saying just what he pleased. TJ insisted that Tenali Raman had saved more lives with his clever tongue than most warriors did with spears.

This argument might have gone on for hours if Mama hadn't arrived. Unaware of our late-evening

picnic, she'd come to tell us that supper was ready, and invited the professor to join us. As for me, for the rest of the week, I had to listen to TJ's endless stories about how *brave* the court jester had actually been.

A 'Bad-Luck' Face

Of the stories about Tenali Raman's bravery TJ insisted on telling me, I liked this one the most. It had just the kind of cheekiness Tenali Raman was famous for. If anybody else had tried it, they would have probably got their head chopped off!

Some people are known for their great talents—writers whose books nobody can stop reading, or poets whose poems are on everybody's lips. Poor Reddappa was known throughout Vijayanagar as the man whose face brought bad luck! Reddappa was actually a good man. He'd never broken the law. He looked after his paddy fields well and kept his wife and children happy. But somehow, his neighbours had gotten the feeling that whenever they saw Reddappa's face in the morning,

their day went all topsy-turvy. Anyone who spotted the man in the morning was guaranteed to miss lunch. And sometimes worse things happened—a bullock-cart wheel would break, or a tree would fall across the road . . .

Poor Reddappa was so embarrassed about his 'bad-luck' face that he started hiding it. To spare his neighbours any bad luck, he set off for his fields before sunrise. That way nobody saw his face in the mornings. He only had the courage to return home after he was sure everyone had already eaten their lunch!

Now this was just the kind of news that travels fast, and soon King Krishnadevaraya heard about 'Bad-luck' Reddappa. The king's curiosity was aroused. And through his ministers, he invited Redappa to court. Of course, he took the precaution of meeting him only *after* he'd consumed a good, sumptuous royal lunch.

Poor Reddappa, not wanting to inflict his famous bad luck on the king, had arrived with his face all covered up in a shawl, even though it was a hot summer day. Only his two eyes peered out fearfully at the courtiers. On the spot, the king decided that the man's reputation for bad luck was all nonsense. He, Krishnadevaraya, was going to prove to everybody that this was just silly superstition—an unfair rumour that merely made things very difficult for Reddappa, who

had done no intentional wrong. Reddappa was asked to come and spend a few days at the palace, and the king himself would look upon his face every morning!

Reddappa shivered and retreated behind his shawl. In muffled tones, through layers of cloth, he thanked the king, but begged not to be made to stay at the palace. He told the king that all the rumours about his 'bad-luck' face were indeed *true*! And he wanted no part of that bad luck to fall upon the royal house.

The king roared with laughter and ordered Reddappa to show his face. And this time, he didn't invite, but *ordered* Reddappa to move into the guest wing of the palace. Most unhappily, Reddappa was forced to follow the king's orders.

The first night, Reddappa could not sleep, dreading the morning. The king, on the other hand, woke up refreshed, and after a good breakfast, sent for Reddappa to meet him in the royal gardens, *without his face wrapped up*! Reddappa, who now had no choice, arrived as summoned. And after a few polite words with the king, returned to his rooms.

Determined to disprove all the 'bad-luck' stories, the king had taken care to order a special feast for lunch. And he was determined not to let Reddappa's face make him miss it. All work at the court proceeded well and on schedule till lunch time. Then, just as the king

was ready to leave the court, an urgent message arrived. The Chinese ambassador had arrived a day early and requested an immediate audience with the king. Vijayanagar and the Chinese empire shared very good relations. So instead of asking the ambassador to court after lunch, as he normally would have done, the king decided on an immediate meeting. And the meeting went on for hours. Somewhere in the middle of the long session, the king's stomach did rumble with hunger, so he suggested that the Chinese delegation join him for lunch, but the ambassador politely declined. Having spent days on the road, his stomach was in terrible condition. He could only sip lukewarm tea! So though the junior delegates were hungry and would have been glad to feast at the palace, they all had to politely refuse the king's invitation because of the ambassador's tummy.

The meeting dragged on and on. Normally the king was a very patient man. But with his stomach empty, and the thought of the special meal he'd ordered going cold, he became rather irritable. Finally, when the Chinese delegates left, it was almost five o'clock in the evening. As the ravenous king rushed to his private chambers, he saw Reddappa strolling under the trees of the orchard. And the sight of the poor man got him furious. Yes, it was true . . . seeing Reddappa's face in the morning had ruined his lunch!

When the king reached the dining hall, he found that all the special food he'd ordered had been disposed of. The rule of the palace kitchen was that the king could only eat freshly cooked food. The kingdom could not afford their ruler getting ill by eating stale food. Remember, there were no fridges in those days. The cooks were laying out new dishes, which were fresh all right, but not the special delicacies that the king had hoped for. This got him into a worse mood!

Before he sat down for the meal, Krishnadevaraya summoned his chief of hospitality and told him to remove Reddappa from the guest room and dump him in prison! By evening, word got out that Reddappa was going to be hanged the next day. The king had concluded that Reddappa *was* a threat to the prosperity of the kingdom and should be immediately disposed of. Nobody protested, not even Reddappa. The poor man was so ashamed about bringing bad luck upon others that he felt death would be preferable to a life where everybody avoided him.

The king had everybody's support to dispose of this Bringer of Bad Luck. But Tenali Raman had other plans. *He* was determined to save the man, whom he believed to be completely innocent. Hadn't Reddappa himself begged not to stay in the palace? Then how could the king accuse him of bringing bad luck?

The next day at court, as the judgement on Reddappa was announced, Tenali Raman stepped forward and asked the king if he could speak a few words in Reddappa's favour. The king agreed. Turning to the court, Tenali Raman said in a quiet, serious voice, 'Yesterday, His Majesty saw Reddappa's face and had the bad luck of missing a sumptuous lunch.' Everybody present nodded their heads tentatively in agreement. They had no idea what Tenali was going to spring on them. He continued, 'At the same time, Reddappa saw the king's face in the morning and that resulted in him getting the death sentence that night. Members of the court, *you* tell me whose face carries more bad luck?'

In the hushed silence that followed, the king realized his folly. Reddappa was immediately released. And the king couldn't meet the eyes of his jester because he was rather ashamed of himself.

The Truthful Tableau

HAMPI, 2 OCTOBER 2005: Since it was Gandhi Jayanti, nobody was working. The professor had promised Mama that he would take us on a tour along the fortifications—those sections that had survived the wars and the centuries of neglect since. Mama was packing a picnic basket. We were all to leave by about ten in the morning, so I was quite surprised to see TJ at the gate, an hour early.

One look at his face told me he wasn't coming with us. I was disappointed and cursed that tea stall that seemed to spoil all our fun. I would soon be going back to school and this would probably be our last picnic. I really didn't want to be stuck a whole day with Mama and the professor arguing over battles and

Vijayanagar's beauty. I called out to TJ to come in and join us for breakfast. I imagined he was as disappointed as I was. But I was wrong!

He walked in furious. 'I'm not coming with you! He insulted our whole village, our ancestors and our entire family!' he blurted out. Startled by this outburst, I had no idea who and what poor TJ was so upset about. Probably the latest tourist coach driver, I suspected. But again, I was wrong. 'No!' he stormed, pacing up and down the veranda, 'It's the professor . . . *You* were there when he said it.' *I* was there? This was getting more and more puzzling.

It was Mama who managed to get TJ seated and figured out what the matter was. TJ was still seething in anger over the last time the professor had been out with us, which had been *three* days ago—checking out the cooking counters. The professor's joke about Tenali Raman not being a brave person still had TJ in a temper; he still couldn't get over the 'insult'.

At such times, Mama is brilliant. I've seen her get my father's temper under control in no time. Within minutes, TJ had simmered down and was sipping hot coffee. Mama was reassuring him how famous his ancestor Tenali Raman was for his bravery! I was speechless as *Mama* then went on to tell *TJ* what she called a well-known story. For a moment I was

embarrassed—surely TJ knew every story there was about his great, great, great . . . you know what. But apparently he didn't know *this* one. We sat spellbound as Mama spun a yarn about his ancestor.

The Mahanavami festival in Vijayanagar was famous. Every traveller who witnessed it was stunned by the sheer grandeur of it all and wrote about it in glowing terms. In fact, visitors from all over the world attended the nine-day long celebrations. Krishnadevaraya liked to invite ambassadors from all the friendly neighbouring kingdoms for the event. Envoys came from as far off as China and Persia.

With such important guests, the king was very particular about each and every performance. Only the best dancers, musicians, poets and artists of the kingdom were allowed to perform. One year, the king wanted tableaux depicting the diversity of the kingdom to be presented. And to ensure the best efforts from his people, he announced a very handsome prize for the best tableau.

That did it! The size of the prize was enough to send even the laziest nobleman scurrying around actively. Everyone at court was determined to win the prize. Elaborate arrangements were made. The theme of most of the tableaux were based on the great victories of the Vijayanagar army, the brave deeds of the king;

some even staged scenes from the king's own poems.

As the king observed the progress of all the participants, he was filled with pride in his people. No kingdom could ever boast of such a great army, nor of such a great capital city. Why, some of the tableaux reminded the king of his battlefield heroics that he'd actually forgotten about! He felt quite a glow of satisfaction that his ministers remembered those events so well. To make sure that all the dignitaries attending the festival got to see their work, many noblemen spent even more money by creating their tableaux on floats that could be pulled up and down the streets by horses. There almost seemed to be a competition for who would spend the most money to impress the king.

Only Tenali Raman seemed in a different mood and did not come to court for some days. Everybody assumed that he too was working on a float. But nobody, not even the king, had caught a glimpse of it. The jester's secrecy made everyone curious. But Tenali Raman talked to no one about his tableau. In fact, throughout the preparation, he seemed to walk around with such a morose look that most people concluded that his tableau experiment was already a flop.

The king began to worry about the mess Tenali Raman might have got into. He didn't like the idea of his famous jester being humiliated in front of such an

important gathering. But in the bustle of the festivities, the king barely got time to talk to Tenali Raman privately.

The day of the parade finally dawned. And while the public enjoyed the show tremendously, the tension amongst the participants was unbearable. Each one wanted to win so badly that he could barely talk politely to his competitors. There were others who had borrowed money to make their tableau the grandest and were now petrified of losing out on the prize.

The judges for the contest were Krishnadevaraya himself, along with two other ambassadors. They went admiringly from one tableau to the other. And by the end of it all, it seemed like a close fight between the minister for agriculture, a nobleman from the king's first wife's family, and a general from the army.

The prize was about to be announced when one old enemy of Tenali Raman remembered *his* tableau. This man was so confident that Tenali's creation would be a mess that he sniggered out loud. He couldn't control himself. Hoping to make a public fool of Tenali Raman, he asked the king about the jester's mysteriously missing tableau.

The king realized that everybody was ashamed to have overlooked Tenali Raman altogether. He quickly asked to be shown the jester's work. But before they

could leave, Tenali Raman took the king aside and pleaded with him not to bring the other judges. He wanted only the king to view his work. But the king would have none of that. The foreign judges needed to see all aspects of Vijayanagar, and how could they judge it, if they didn't see it?

Unlike the other grand tableaux, Tenali Raman's creation was not on wheels. So the king and his guests had to get into a carriage to view it. And unlike certain other wealthy participants, Tenali Raman had chosen to build his tableau in a poorer quarter of the town. So after all the opulence of the other works, the king and his guests had to ride through streets not so well lit, or so well paved. At the end of a lonely road, in an abandoned courtyard of an old temple, Tenali Raman led the king inside. And there was his tableau!

It was an enormous, grotesque effigy of some kind of a rakshasa. The king recoiled and demanded to know the meaning of this bizarre creation. In that dank and dingy corner, a booming voice emanated from the effigy, almost in reply to the king. 'I am the demon that Goddess Durga kills every year. And I am the Ravana whom you burn every Dasara. But don't fool yourselves . . .' Here, an eerie cackle from the effigy sent a tingle of fear down the spines of the onlookers. The voice continued. 'I never leave. I am as much at home

in Vijayanagar, as in every other kingdom, right through the year . . . I am poverty and disease, in my gnarled limbs you'll see hunger and grief . . . My voice is the cry of the thousands of war widows . . .' It was too much for the king, this affront to his kingdom, right in front of foreign dignitaries! He drew his sword and threatened to destroy the almost life-like monster.

For a moment there was silence, then a flap of cloth from the rakshasa's dhoti lifted up and two scared men scrambled out. They threw themselves at the king's feet, begging for mercy. They pleaded that it was Tenali Raman's lines that they had learnt and repeated.

The king paused and turned to his jester in fury. Tenali Raman bowed his head. 'Your Majesty . . . forgive me, but this was meant to be a private message to you from me.'

Tenali Raman's grave face brought the king down to earth. He realized in a flash what his jester had saved him from—nine long days of self-congratulation! With the least amount of money spent, Tenali Raman had told the king that there was a lot he had to do for his countrymen before he could sit back and pat his own back. The king relaxed, smiled at his friend and put his hand on Tenali's shoulder. In front of two stunned fellow judges who'd expected Tenali's head to roll, the first prize for the tableau competition was awarded to Tenali Raman!

Halfway into the story, Professor Bhat had arrived and had seated himself unobtrusively on the veranda steps, listening to Mama. He must have understood why Mama had picked this story. At the end of it, he looked at TJ's face that was glowing with pride, and said, 'Yes, Tenali Raman's courage was unique. He often put his own life at risk, but he always resolved tricky situations with just his words. Non-violence, in other words.' He patted TJ on his shoulder, before adding, 'Gandhiji would have approved of his methods!'

I knew then that TJ was definitely accompanying us on that picnic.

A Grand Wedding

Once Tenali Raman's sharp tongue angered the king so much that he was sentenced to death! But the clever jester managed to wriggle out of that tight spot by bribing his executioners, tricking the king into believing he was dead, and then when the monarch began mourning the loss of his favourite courtier, Tenali Raman popped up in court, much to the king's relief!

At other times he was fined, sometimes punished and once even banished from court. But always, the king's genuine love and respect for this witty jester ensured that Tenali Raman was back as the star of the Vijayanagar court.

On one occasion, Tenali Raman got so furious with the king, that *he* left the court in a huff. For a few days

the king also sulked. After all, nobody had the right to walk out of court. It was the *king*'s right to dismiss a courtier when he misbehaved, but courtiers had no business questioning or getting displeased with the king. A few days passed . . . then a week, and then a fortnight. The king became restless. He had already admitted (only to himself, of course) that, as usual, Tenali Raman had been right. He had even given orders to the concerned officials that they should follow Tenali Raman's advice. But still the jester showed no signs of returning to court.

The king sent a secret messenger to Tenali Raman's house, late at night. The public should not know that the king was apologizing to the clown. But the house was locked up. Secret emissaries went to the village of Tenali, but again they had no luck. Tenali Raman's wife and family were at their ancestral home, but they had no idea where Tenali Raman was.

By now the king was desperate. Life at court had become so dreary that he felt he would die of boredom if Tenali Raman didn't return soon. One night, he had a brainwave. The king realized that it was Tenali Raman's intelligence that would expose him. The jester could never resist a good joke or a challenge. So the king thought up a challenge that would appeal to Tenali Raman. He made an announcement that the king's

royal well was due to get married, and he wanted the wells from all the villages to attend this auspicious occasion. It was the duty of every village headman to ensure that his village's well attended the wedding!

The entire country went into a panic. This sounded like the orders of a madman! What would the enemy spies report to their kings? If the neighbours realized that the king of Vijayanagar had lost his mind, they'd attack immediately!

In one remote village, a stranger who had settled recently on the outskirts, approached the village headman and tried to calm the poor panic-stricken elder. The stranger was none other than Tenali Raman, of course, and when he'd heard about the absurd invitation, he knew immediately that it was his king, seeking him out. Well, just like the king, Tenali Raman too was done with sulking and had been missing his active court life. He missed the king who enjoyed and understood all his jokes. The villagers were useless when it came to appreciating good poetry. Yes, he was well and truly tired of sulking and ready to return to court.

He advised the headman of his village not to worry. Instead, he made him collect the headmen of all the surrounding villages and together they left for the capital. The poor headmen had no idea how they were to face their newly-turned-mad king, but they put

themselves in the hands of this confident and clever stranger.

At the outskirts of the city, the large group set up camp. Tenali Raman advised his headman to send a message to the king. The message claimed that all the village headmen had brought their wells to attend the wedding. As polite guests, all the wells were waiting *outside* the city. According to custom, wasn't the royal well supposed to come out of its home to welcome the guests in for the marriage ceremonies?

The king read the message and sighed with relief. Nobody but his jester could have thought of such an answer! He sent a reply to the village headman informing him that he, Krishnadevaraya himself, would be coming out of the city to welcome the wells in for the wedding. The bewildered headmen were in a panic. If the king himself came out, he'd see that they hadn't brought along their wells . . . Since he seemed to have lost his head, wouldn't he then be furious with them? Oh, this whole episode was just too confusing and they began to wonder if the stranger who had led them here in the first place had actually landed them in a royal mess.

But the stranger looked most pleased with the developments and assured them that their lives were not in danger. He swore that he himself would tell the king whose idea it was to lie about the wells. Sure

enough, within the hour, a procession could be seen coming out of the city's main gates. Even from a distance, everyone could recognize the king's chariot and his retinue of bodyguards. The poor village headmen were by now certain they were going to be beheaded by their crazy king.

The king approached the villagers and summoned the headman who had written the letter. The poor man stepped forward quivering, and before he could stop himself, he began to stutter. He begged the king for forgiveness . . . He swore that it hadn't been his idea to lie about the wells . . . It was all this stranger's idea . . . Could the king please be merciful . . . ? The king let the old man go on for a while, and then gently interrupted him to enquire who this stranger was.

That's when Tenali Raman stepped forward. The beard and wig he'd been wearing as a disguise for the past few months were gone. The villagers now gasped when they realized who they'd sheltered in their village for all those days. Well, the king and jester embraced, right there in front of a crowd of headmen. Both men silently vowed that there would never be any more arguments between them. They'd missed each other's friendship and company too much!

Back to School

HAMPI, 4 OCTOBER 2005: It's not fair! I have to get back to school, whereas Mama's assignment with *Monuments* magazine has got extended. So she will just come down to Bangalore to drop me off, get her zillions of film rolls developed, and then it's back to Hampi for her. That principal of mine has refused to let me extend my stay. I am going to miss this beautiful place, TJ and his Tenali Raman stories, Auntie Ela, the guest house cook . . . even Professor Bhat. We'd all become such good friends.

All Mama's worries about my report on Hampi have been banished. Last night, around a campfire dinner that Professor Saab had arranged as a farewell party for me, Auntie Ela made a formal announcement. She

told everybody (all Mama's colleagues from the magazine were there) that she and Professor Saab had read my report and were very impressed. If they were asked to grade it, they'd both have given it an A+, she said. I looked at Mama, and I'd never seen her look so proud of me . . . not even when I won the prize for best basketball player for the year.

But there's a secret about my report that I must confess. Left to myself, I'd never have got down to writing it—not even to impress my principal. It was TJ who got me to do it. After all the sessions we'd had with Auntie Ela and Professor Bhat, he made up his mind that he wanted to be a tourist guide, explaining the beauties and history of Hampi to tourists. He didn't enjoy being at the tea stall and had convinced his father that he'd rather accompany the tourist groups that hired their family's mini van. More importantly, he didn't want to be like those guides who just recited a whole lot of details about Hampi like a mugged up poem. He wanted visitors to love and remember Hampi for months and years after they left it. So, he said, he needed my help!

He begged me to write down all that Professor Saab, Auntie Ela or Mama said about Hampi when he was away, stuck at the tea stall. He *was* making his own notes, but he wanted me to fill in the gaps. I tried

wriggling out but he wanted to be a guide so badly that I started getting a lot more serious about my note-taking. Before I knew it, I realized that all that I'd written down for TJ could just be xeroxed and turned into the report *I* had to give my principal. So really, TJ deserves half the credit for that A+ Auntie Ela graded me.

School is going to be so boring after all this. But Mama's promised that we will be back again. Either on another assignment for the magazine or on a holiday. Mama's sure that once the principal reads my report, she'll never refuse to let me accompany Mama on her assignments. Especially since Mama only photographs historical monuments!

TJ's First Official Tour

HAMPI, 6 OCTOBER 2005: TJ arrived very early at the guest house today. He looked shy and embarrassed. He wanted Mama and me to be there in his father's mini van on its morning trip. It was going to be his first attempt as official guide for Tenali Tours and Travels! And his father had closed the tea stall for the occasion, so that he could be on the bus and judge his son for himself. Poor TJ was bursting with excitement and fear.

When we stepped out of the guest house, I shrieked with excitement. Parked outside was a bright-red mini van, with a yellow flag fluttering importantly in the front. It took me a moment to realize that it was the same Tenali Tours and Travels van, repainted. I scrambled on with TJ, but Mama just had to play the

spoilsport. She said we needed to sit at the back because the tourists would ride in front and TJ would be too distracted chatting with me if I sat next to him. I realized that what Mama said was right. It was very important that this tour went off well because TJ's father was on the bus, observing how his son performed. If he didn't do well, it would be back to the tea stall for him. So I hid my disappointment and sat at the back with Mama.

I must say, it was a great ride. And TJ was terrific as a guide! He got everybody so interested in the monuments that they kept firing him with more and more questions. Mama was very impressed that he was so quick with answers. When he didn't have a ready reply, he stopped and took down the question, to find out later. Once or twice he turned to Mama and me for an answer. Mama noticed that TJ presented Hampi with such enthusiasm that many in the bus were actually making notes, on paper napkins or the backs of bills! When the van finally stopped at the tea stall, nobody got off. They all huddled around TJ, asking him to repeat things he'd told them earlier and bombarding him with even more questions. TJ's father looked quite impressed with his son. Mainly because the longer they all hung around the tea shop, the more business he'd get! Quick to spot a business opportunity, he hurriedly left the bus, taking orders for chai and vadas from everybody.

When I looked at my watch, I realized we had been on the road for nearly four hours! As the smell of frying vadas wafted in through the van's windows, I saw Mama too was scribbling away in her diary. She nudged me and told me to stop sniffing at the vadas and to listen to what TJ was saying. Somebody had casually remarked that Vijayanagar *was* the ultimate Hindu city, with virtually all the gods of the Hindu pantheon in residence. But TJ surprised his audience with a question. He asked them if they knew that in fact the city of Vijayanagar had a number of Islamic quarters too. Nobody, it turned out, including Mama, had heard of this! No wonder she was taking down notes.

TJ's assistant from the shop climbed into the bus, balancing trays of piping-hot vadas for all of us. With Mama so foolishly making me sit right at the back, I doubted if the vadas would last until the back rows. TJ's father followed with the chai and heard TJ generously offer to take everybody to one of the Muslim quarters.

There was a heated exchange of words between TJ and his father, but since it was all in Telugu, I couldn't understand a word. Some of the tourists obviously did, and one of them stood up to pacify the agitated man. 'Of course, sir, we all understand that taking us in the

van to the Muslim quarter would mean a *small* extra charge.' Turning around and waving his hands to include his fellow passengers, he grandly spoke on their behalf. 'I'm sure we all realize that the services of such a good guide too must be expensive . . . so charge us for the extra ride, but *please*, take us there!' A round of applause followed these words. TJ managed to look both shy and proud at the man's praise. And his father was immensely relieved that everything was going to be paid for.

The moment the last cup of tea was cleared, we set off again. Since I hadn't known about this aspect of the city's history, I assumed that the Islamic quarter was miles away, in some deserted part of the river valley. But, in fact, it was virtually right next to the royal quarters. To an increasingly interested audience, TJ said that every Vijayanagar king employed the best military equipment available at that time. It was well known that the Turks and Persians were excellent horsemen, so these foreign mercenaries made up a good chunk of the army as cavalrymen. And this was where they lived.

When TJ asked the driver to stop the van, I was surprised. I expected an Islamic colony filled with ruins that had minarets and domed roofs. But the buildings around us looked pretty much like the rest of the city.

One building that I would have thought was a typical mandapa, was in fact a mosque. It had been built in 1439 by Ahmad Khan, a commander in the army of Devaraya II. A tomb nearby had more Islamic architectural features, like arched niches and a dome. And there were many graves beside the tomb.

While I digested this aspect of the city's past, TJ continued telling us other bits of the city's history. Since the Portuguese were also trading in horses and military equipment, TJ believed that there must have been a Portuguese quarter too. Turning to me, he reminded me about those shards of Chinese pottery we'd seen on our first meeting. So TJ wound up his first tour with these words, 'True, the kings who ruled from this capital city were Hindus. But they were tolerant of other religions, encouraged trade with all countries and borrowed good ideas, no matter which culture they came from. So, at any point in Vijayanagar's history, the city was home to a number of foreigners of different religions—Muslim, Jewish and Christian.'

That would have been a nice thought for all of us to mull over, but my dear mother couldn't resist having the last word. And, of course, it *had* to be about the 'beauty' of the city: its combination of Hindu and Islamic styles, how its architects and builders used the natural beauty of the rocky landscape so effectively, etc. I

knew if I listened any longer, I would melt from embarrassment. So I sneaked out of my seat while Mama was too busy lecturing to notice, and went and sat up front with TJ.

The Jester Plays Diplomat

HAMPI, 9 OCTOBER 2005: My last day in Hampi. Though I was thrilled for TJ, now that he was a full-time guide, the sad part was that I could only meet him in the evenings. And after talking non-stop on the van to the tourists, he wasn't as full of beans as he usually was.

As I went down to the tea stall to say my goodbyes, TJ came running towards me, his face flushed with excitement. 'Look at what I got from Appa,' he burst out, thrusting a small box into my hands. I opened it to find a neat pile of fresh new visiting cards, with TJ's name on it! Below were printed the words, 'Senior Guide, Tenali Tours and Travels'. Oooooohh, I was green with envy. At that moment I wished I could

leave school, take up a job and get my own visiting card. How lucky TJ was, not to have to worry about principals and exams . . .

But TJ had too much to fit into this last evening, so he hurriedly grabbed the box back from me, shoved it into his pocket and led me to his home. Mama, myself, Auntie Ela and Professor Bhat had all been invited for dinner by TJ's mother. TJ wanted me to come early because he had a secret to share with me, he said.

As we approached his house, his voice got serious as he told me, 'Sulekha, I've told you so many stories—but I'm never certain which of them are true and which are fiction.' I felt a bit confused by his serious tone. He continued, 'But the story I've saved up for today, I somehow believe to be true.' I waited. This was the first time TJ had sounded so 'official'. I hoped becoming a guide wouldn't turn him into a grown-up overnight! 'I almost forgot about this story, but going to the Islamic quarter reminded me that I hadn't told it to you,' he said. We could see his house by now, but with the story about to begin, we decided to sit by a tamarind tree instead.

It was another case of Tenali Raman arousing incurable envy among the other courtiers. His popularity with the king was at its highest. With his razor-sharp tongue showing no signs of slowing down,

his earnings from both his wit and his poems made others weak with jealousy. So finally, a number of powerful noblemen at court plotted to fix Tenali Raman. They began to spread false rumours that Tenali Raman was a secret agent working for the neighbouring Bahmani kingdom.

When the king first heard about it, he refused to believe his trusted jester would ever betray him. But by the time he heard these reports from about ten different ministers, he became very worried. And from that point, he soon grew openly suspicious of Tenali Raman. When the king foolishly confided his worries with a senior minister, the old crook grabbed his chance. He advised the king to secretly have Tenali's home searched. That was the only way to remove all doubts.

For the first time in their long friendship, the king was spying on Tenali Raman. But any guilt he might have felt for acting behind Tenali's back was wiped away when the spies returned. In their hands were documents written in Persian and addressed to Tenali Raman. A translator was summoned to tell the king what the letters were about. It seemed that Tenali Raman was providing secret information to the Bahmanis so that they could attack Vijayanagar at the appropriate time!

Horror struck, the king did not realize that the entire

episode was a hoax. The letters were forgeries and had been planted in Tenali Raman's house by the plotters. Now that the court had 'proof' that Tenali Raman was a traitor working for the neighbouring sultan, he would be tried for treason and probably sentenced to death.

The king sank into a fit of depression. On the one hand he was heartbroken that his closest friend and confidant in court had betrayed him. But then, the timely discovery of the 'secret letters' had saved the country from a long and expensive war. And yet, he couldn't bring himself to condemn Tenali Raman to death for treason.

Finally he settled for banishing his jester from the kingdom. Vijayanagar's most famous citizen had to pack his bags and leave. Tenali Raman was smart enough to have figured out which of his jealous rivals were behind these accusations. His first thoughts were to plan an appropriate revenge from beyond the borders of the country. But gradually, as he spent more and more days away from his land, a new idea emerged in his mind.

The scheming ministers at the Vijayanagar court had been successful in only part of their plan. And when the king refused to have Tenali Raman hanged, they were flummoxed. They knew their problems weren't over even if this wily jester was forced to live hundreds

of miles away. Expecting some form of retaliation from Tenali Raman, the ministers sent off their own spies to the neighbouring Hindu kingdoms to report back on Tenali's activities. But right at the start, the jester had outsmarted them. Unnoticed, he had headed straight to the Bahmani kingdom, the last court anybody expected him to approach.

The Muslim rulers there were not aware of Tenali Raman's exile. They welcomed the famous man as an ambassador from the Vijayanagar court. An uneasy relationship existed between the Bahmanis and Vijayanagar. Numerous battles had been fought between the two kingdoms. So initially the Muslim court was not sure about the purpose of Tenali's visit. Was their powerful neighbour trying to trick them into signing some new treaty?

But the famous wit and humour that had melted the heart of Krishnadevaraya, worked wonders in the Bahmani court too. Within days, Tenali Raman had all the Bahmani noblemen in splits with laughter, poking fun at them as well as the Vijayanagar courtiers. And soon he was able to convince the rulers that he had come in search of a genuine, long-term peace agreement between the two nations. He even convinced the sultan to send a formal peace proposal to the Vijayanagar court. But at the last moment, the sultan wavered. What

if Krishnadevaraya saw this act as one of weakness and immediately attacked the Bahmanis?

Here Tenali Raman staked his life. He offered to stay back in the Bahmani court as a hostage till the peace proposal was delivered, accepted and replied to by Krishnadevaraya. In case the Vijayanagarans responded with an attack, the Bahmanis were free to hang Tenali Raman. He even co-signed the proposal that the sultan was to send.

It was a very courageous gamble. Tenali Raman had no idea how angry the king still was. And the weeks waiting for a reply passed excruciatingly slowly. Just when the jester began to feel that his old friend Krishnadevaraya was now his sworn enemy, a messenger arrived from Vijayanagar. And this was no ordinary messenger. He came accompanied with four majestic elephants from the personal stable of the king! The animals were weighed down with the most sumptuous gifts for the Bahmani ruler. Krishnadevaraya had countersigned the peace agreement and there were celebrations in the Bahmani court.

In fact, the only thing that spoilt the party for the sultan was that Tenali Raman now had to return to his home. Krishnadevaraya had very clearly written that since his diplomat Tenali Raman's work at the Bahmani court had reached a fruitful conclusion, could the king

kindly send him back. The Bahmani court would have loved to have kept this entertainer for another six months though . . .

It was an interesting story, but when TJ finished, it somehow seemed flat and unimpressive. Perhaps this was because both of us knew it was the last story of my holiday, and that added a touch of gloom to everything. I even knew that however tasty TJ's mother's dinner was tonight, I'd find it tasteless. Still, there was something else that I felt was missing. I soon remembered. 'TJ,' I perked up, 'why do you believe that *this* story among all the others is definitely true?' He'd been waiting for me to ask, so he jumped up and asked me to follow him into the house.

I could get the delicious aromas of typical Andhra cooking from the kitchen, where his mother could be heard humming away as she bustled about. TJ led me straight to the puja alcove. There he reached behind a big picture of Lord Venkateshwara and pulled out something wrapped in an old newspaper. We sat on the floor to inspect what he unwrapped. In his hands he held two metal plaques. One was very obviously in Arabic . . . or was it Persian? And the other was in the Telugu script.

TJ held the two pieces with such reverence I was almost scared to handle them myself. 'What are these?'

I asked in a hushed tone. 'They've been in our family for centuries and the family claims that they belonged to our ancestor Tenali Raman. Appa had them translated. The Persian one reads,

"'To wage war between two distrustful nations requires but an army.

But to wrest peace from such a volatile situation, requires a saint."'

TJ looked a bit embarrassed because he'd gotten so emotional while saying all this. Sheepishly he continued, 'Of course it sounds much better when read out in Persian.'

I still didn't get it. How did this Persian verse prove the last story about Tenali Raman was true? Here TJ looked triumphant. He read out the Telugu lines from the other plaque. And of course I still had a blank look since I didn't understand a word. 'When you translate those lines, they mean the same thing . . . exactly what the Persian verse says!'

Dumb, super-dumb me, continued to gape blankly. TJ burst out laughing at my expression. 'Listen, this is not hard, historical proof or anything. But I like to believe that it was after the peace agreement that both grateful kings presented Tenali Raman with these plaques . . . It's just a possibility,' he ended, a distant smile on his face, as if he'd transported himself to that

ancient court, 500 years back.

I turned the plaques over in my hands. Yes, what a wonderful possibility that was! And to have these nuggets of history quietly tucked away in your very own house . . . No wonder TJ was so proud and passionate about his great, great . . . grandfather. He had these to remind him every day.

I looked out of the front door. Mama and Auntie Ela were chatting and walking towards the house. Auntie Ela had a napkin-wrapped dish in her hands, which immediately cheered me up. I forgot about the goodbyes I didn't want to say and looked forward to what I was sure would be delicious Bengali sweets for dessert.

10+

Hampi, September 2005: A breathtaking landscape, the ruins of a prosperous kingdom, and over cups of hot tea, two friends discover stories about the world's smartest jester—Tenali Raman.

Sulekha is studying in Class V and has been allowed by her principal to accompany her mother to Hampi, on the condition that she produces a full report about life in the Vijayanagar empire on her return. In Hampi, Sulekha meets the cocky TJ, who claims to be a descendant of one of Vijayanagar's most famous citizens, Tenali Raman, and together they start collecting stories about the jester and his kingdom.

Tenali, it turns out, had a solution to every problem that befell the kingdom—from the mundane to the bizarre: How do you carry a pot brimming with holy water over hundreds of miles, without spilling a single drop? The king wants to build a palace he has seen only in his dreams, how can he be stopped? And a man is to be hanged for having a 'bad-luck' face, can Tenali prevent this?

As they exchange anecdotes about Tenali Raman, Sulekha and her friends also learn more about the Vijayanagar empire, King Krishnadevaraya and what life was like in sixteenth-century south India.

Wonderfully witty and bubbling over with fun and facts, this book is not just about one of India's sharpest minds, it is a peep into a vibrant period in Indian history.

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